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ABSTRACT

This book reports findings of research to explore the changing relationships between British further education (FE) colleges and the communities they serve. Chapter 1 outlines changes in FE over the past 10 years to provide a context. It deconstructs and conceptualizes the term "community" within the context of this project, and explores communities' incomplete, outdated views of FE. Chapter 2 examines why both 16-19 year-olds and adults choose to study at FE colleges. Motivations identified include: positive experiences of family members; word-of-mouth from friends or colleagues; adults' desire to advance in the workplace or to change careers, and young people's avoidance of a boring job. Chapter 3 contains students' reflections on their experiences with FE, and reports that adults were daunted and nervous at the start, not knowing what to expect. Many were critical of induction programs. There was a mismatch between employers' expectations and those of lecturers designing and providing a course; and community organizations felt access to, and sharing of, resources and rooms in FE colleges was almost a "right." Chapter 4 looks at key findings related to evolving policy formulation in the FE sector that highlight an inherent issue in FE related to the problem of defining its nature and purpose. That issue is how to cater to diverse students and communities within constraints of marketization, resources, and national policy. Appendices present an outline of the experiences and processes of college staff undertaking research in their own institutions. (Contains 54 references.) (YLB)

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book is derived from an innovative and complex research project, commissioned by FEDA in 1996.[1] The project was ambitious in two ways. Firstly, it addressed the fundamental role of colleges, which is to serve their local communities effectively. Secondly, it engaged pioneering research methods.

The research aimed to provide information and analysis to help colleges better understand their changing interaction with the community over an extended period: a period which also coincided with radical changes to the structure and curriculum delivery patterns in further education. The main focus was the changing relationships with communities during the 1990s following incorporation. Inevitably, the pace of change has outstripped the research. Now, in 2000, the context is changing again, with the creation of the Learning and Skills sector. The strong emphasis in the new planned structure on 'bottom up' as well as 'top down' planning, the importance of including users in decision making, and locality as an essential focus for providers all reassert the importance of community. The emphasis, as in our research, is also on the complex nature of communities and their learning needs. There are many different interest groups and constituencies jostling in any small locality. Colleges must respond to them all. This research therefore has some important messages for the future.

Over the last five years, FEDA has actively promoted the engagement of FE practitioners in research. This is part of our commitment to ensuring that research, through close links to its users, can be used to develop better provision – specifically to improve the experience and achievements of learners. This project was the first major structured opportunity for higher and further education to work in partnership. We have begun to build an active and equal relationship between FE and HE partners, moving beyond the concept of researcher (HE) and researched (FE).

FEDA, the colleges and Warwick University were all in active partnership for the duration of the project. College lecturers, supported by the university, undertook the research. Research skills training was provided. The project was steered by a group whose composition reflected the focus and methodology. I do not want to paint an overly rosy picture. Creating something new and innovative often involves mistakes, hitches and frustration. This project has had its share of them all. However, the lessons learned have been highly valuable. We will build them into future work.

Research in post-16 learning has come a long way since this project started. There is a much stronger commitment at policy level and in higher education to making partnership work, and to ensuring a robust and workable link between research and practice. The Government has committed greater resources to research for two key reasons, both of which reinforce our approach. One, to strengthen evidence-based policy and two, to ensure that the outcomes of publicly funded

research are geared to enabling change. There is also a growing research culture in further education reflected in FEDA's FE Research Network with its annual conference and the journal *College research*. Further education increasingly wishes to participate in a research culture.

A particular debt is owed to Peter Scott, now Vice Chancellor of Kingston University, for his challenge to the research community to embrace new ways of conducting research and new relationships with practitioners.[2] This work was an inspiration to FEDA to grasp the nettle and invest in this project. The nine colleges in the West Midlands were pioneers and we are very grateful for the time, skill, and support that they offered to the project. In particular, we thank the following researchers in colleges who worked on the project throughout: Paul Allen, Colin Dyer, Phil Whitehead, Fergus McKay, Chris Smith, Iris Flaum, Brian Starbuck, Stephanie Saunders, Andy Newark and Andy Young.

Ursula Howard
Director, Research and Development, FEDA

Notes

[1] Further reports from the research are available from FEDA and the Continuing Education Department at the University of Warwick.

[2] Gibbons M, Limoges C, Nowotny H, Shartzman S, Scott P, Trow M. *The new production of knowledge*. Sage, 1994.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, further education has been in a state of transition. While this was accelerated by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the processes of change were already well under way by then. Further changes are taking place. Following the publication of a major public inquiry into further education, led by Helena Kennedy QC, the Government announced a series of new initiatives to promote lifelong learning, and undertook a systematic review of post-16 education and training, with further education occupying a central place.

Inevitably, this process of change has helped reshape colleges' relationships with their communities. Already by the early 1980s, colleges were increasingly catering for new groups of young people, and by the late 1980s they had become the main providers of educational opportunities for adult learners. At the same time, colleges were adapting to a more competitive market place. Vocational training was being provided not only in colleges but also by an ever-wider range of commercial agencies. Schools were competing for the A-level market. Colleges had to diversify into new programme areas to attract other and new groups of students in their local communities, and were creating new relationships with their communities long before the legal changes brought about by the 1992 Act.

This process created a fast-changing, responsive and highly differentiated FE system. When Helena Kennedy reviewed the future of further education, it was already clear that the colleges represented a major force for building a new culture of lifelong learning in Britain. The central role of further education was confirmed by Bob Fryer's report into lifelong learning (1997), and was clearly recognised in the Government's 1998 Green Paper, *The learning age*, which argued that colleges should be 'beacons of learning' in their local communities. This clarion call was warmly welcomed by all the bodies representing the interests of further education in Britain.

Yet, while colleges have moved on, our research reveals that many people still view further education as the 'local tech'. Kennedy notes that further education often tends to be undervalued and unrecognised:

> *... despite the formidable role played by further education, it is the least understood and celebrated part of the learning tapestry ... there is also an appalling ignorance amongst decision-makers about what goes on in further education.* Kennedy, 1997, p1

How much does it matter that public attitudes and perceptions are lagging behind reality? In this report, we review the evidence of a gap between perceptions and reality, and show that this may be holding colleges back in their efforts to serve the wide range of community interests that have a stake – actual or potential – in what further education has to offer.

Our study's central aim was to gather evidence of the ways different stakeholders in the community viewed further education. It was born at a time when the changes

brought about by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 were starting to take effect, further diversifying the range of FE provision for 16–19-year-olds and adult students. The 1992 Act also extended further education's network and partnership potential to HE institutions, TECs and employers; and it changed FE colleges' relationship with local education authorities (LEAs) and schools, as colleges took control of their own finances and policies.

If colleges are to play an important role in the community and economy, it is important to identify the groups further education currently serves and the groups that are being socially excluded from further education, by analysing the perceptions of both participants and non-participants. Moreover, as well as having external communities, the FE college is itself a community which needs to be examined and understood.

The project began in 1996. It was well under way by the time Kennedy, Tomlinson, Dearing, Fryer and the Green Paper were published, and in many ways it anticipated many of the issues in the emerging policy debate. In particular it focused upon such central issues as participation and access, strategic partnerships, local capacity-building in the community and, above all, lifelong learning.

Further education is central to the new debate over lifelong learning. Colleges – potentially, at least – offer a tremendous resource to underpin any broadening of participation in lifelong learning. FE colleges already attract more adult learners than any other type of provider, and it is easy to see why: few people in Britain live or work more than a few minutes from one. College teaching encompasses a broad range, from basic skills courses through to higher education. Colleges usually enjoy a high level of brand recognition from local people, even if this is often based on a limited and dated perception of what is on offer. There is growing flexibility and innovation in the sector, which has shown a strong interest in developing and supporting open learning, summer schools, weekend college ventures, credit-based accreditation, franchising and new approaches to progression.

Further education's central place in the new lifelong learning agenda has also raised the importance of research into the sector. University academics have become increasingly interested in researching post-compulsory education. However, as Ainley and Bailey point out, 'there is some sensitivity in further education today about academic researchers "coming down from on high" to investigate a sector of education in which they have previously had little interest' (1997, p*vii*).

College staff and managers themselves increasingly want to develop a research culture that will encourage greater valuing of research and will promote research by lecturers and others in their own sector – a development that FEDA has been keen to foster and encourage. Training FE college staff so that they had the skills and confidence to undertake research was an important element of this project.

What approach to research should the FE sector take? FEDA has particularly focused on strategic research in encouraging colleges – individually, regionally and nationally – to develop a research culture. Strategic research is designed to influence policy and hence improve practice; it influences institutional practice over a longer timescale than does action research. Strategic research sits somewhere between basic ('blue skies') and applied ('practical') research. Daniel suggests that 'the appropriate starting point is assessments of key problems that are likely to emerge in the medium-term future to which ... research can make a contribution' (1993, p6). Its purpose is to enable practitioners and researchers to collaborate in undertaking both research and dissemination. Wide dissemination of the research findings and good practice are important elements of strategic research.

Aims and objectives

Colleges have long enjoyed diverse relationships with their communities. Even when their main business lay in day release for apprentices, they had to develop relationships with employers, awarding bodies and regulatory agencies such as the training boards, as well as with their LEAs. In recent decades, this pattern has given

way to a more complex, varied and often diffuse set of relationships with a wider range of stakeholders. The 1992 Act pushed their development to a new level, not least by reducing LEAs' importance in determining priorities and planning, and by encouraging greater experimentation and diversity in the FE system. Indeed, colleges themselves have become important stakeholders in their local communities, and are increasingly recognised as such.

This process has had far-reaching consequences, noted by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC):

> *Since colleges have become self-governing they have devised broad mission statements which aim to respond to the education and training needs of individuals, businesses and the wider community. Colleges provide a wide range of vocational and general education courses which successfully meet the needs of school leavers, adults and employers and contribute to the achievement of the national targets for education and training ... Colleges are increasing participation in further education by delivering courses in community centres and other locations separate and sometimes remote from their main sites. They have also been active in widening access to further education by introducing more flexible methods of delivering the curriculum.* FEFC, 1996, summary

Colleges therefore tend to interact with a wider range of external partners than they used to; they do so in increasingly varied ways; and they are of greater importance to a broader section of stakeholders in the local community. Yet relatively little is known, in any systematic way, about the implications of these important developments. *The FE college and its communities* project sought to explore the changing relationships between colleges and the communities they serve, including the relationships between and within colleges. A key purpose of the research was thereby to inform our understanding of further education's national significance.

Our approach to the research

The nine Midlands colleges involved in this project all have long-established links with the University of Warwick (for instance, through its 2+2 degree programme, the Community University Board and a formally constituted Further Education Research Consortium). Collaboration in research between the university (represented by the Department of Continuing Education) and its nine local FE partners, with FEDA as an active participant, was itself novel and experimental. FEDA extended the project to another group of three colleges, located in rural and urban areas and with student populations differentiated by age, gender, social class and programme of study.

The project aims were to impact upon policy and practice by:

- Investigating the changing nature of relationships between FE colleges, the communities they serve and the local organisations with which they interact, seeking to identify the value further education is adding to the area
- Developing further a philosophy of further education
- Strengthening FE colleges' ongoing capacity to relate to their communities
- Examining ways in which strategic research partnerships can be developed in the FE sector and identifying a model for partnership research.

Underpinning these aims is a set of questions that shaped the research methodology. For example, how do colleges perceive and define their local community? How far do the attitudes of the public, private and voluntary sectors influence the education and training of FE colleges?

The recent changes in further education are stimulating interest in researching the post-compulsory sector of education. This project was distinctive in that the research was undertaken largely by college staff rather than by university researchers working in isolation. Research training and support was provided by the university's Department of Continuing Education. The project was organised into discrete

work packages based on specific tasks. A variety of research methods were employed, such as a questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, documentary evidence and policy analysis. A contact group, consisting of the college researchers, met regularly to discuss research strategies and issues.

All the colleges participated in the first set of work packages, consisting of:

- A review of the situation 10 years ago
- A contemporary review of the college context
- A survey of student data
- A questionnaire survey of community groups and employers' views on further education.

Coordinating these early work packages was not easy, and a process of selection was used in order to involve fewer colleges at the subsequent interview stage of the research. In addition, a literature review of research on further education was undertaken by two university staff. An expert seminar was organised to help clarify conceptual understanding and prompt debate; four papers were presented for discussion, looking at a changing further education, the connotations of community, communities and economic regeneration, and community and citizenship.

Interested staff in each college were identified to undertake the research. The questionnaire (using open and closed questions) was designed by five staff from different colleges; for most, this was their first experience of questionnaire design. Several meetings were spent discussing the framework and refining the questions; reaching a consensus on the wording of questions was not always straightforward. A pilot survey was undertaken to test the questionnaire's validity.

Questionnaires were sent to local employers, voluntary and community groups, and local government organisations. Care was taken to prevent duplication by the three participating Coventry colleges. The questionnaire aimed to identify local attitudes to and perceptions of further education in general; some respondents referred to specific college experiences rather than to further education as a whole. In total 566 responses were received, with response rates varying between colleges.

The questionnaire was used to identify a sample for interviewing – respondents were asked to specify whether they were willing to be interviewed. Several groups of people were interviewed for the qualitative stage of the research: members of community/voluntary organisations, employers, local government organisations, TECs and trade unionists, FE students and lecturers. The sample included a wide range of students taking a variety of courses (part-time and full-time), including 16–19-year-olds, adult students (including outreach) and special needs students.

The issues raised by the questionnaire were followed up in depth by the interviews, which were taped, transcribed and analysed. Interviewing is a skilled process and many of the college staff were initially nervous, but this feeling eased after their first one or two interviews. Interviews were semi-structured, normally lasting between 40 and 90 minutes; 100 interviews were completed.

To obtain a fuller picture of further education's context both past and present, other research approaches were used. Using the sample colleges as case studies, one college lecturer constructed a profile of each college by analysing its management information systems data on students and programmes. This, however, was problematic in relation to some aspects of the data, as colleges use different classifications. Using documentary evidence and interviews, each college also undertook an outline of itself 10 years ago and now, to identify the changes that have taken and are taking place. These have now been published in various formats as research reports.

Inviting college staff to undertake the research helped to promote a research culture in some colleges. All the staff enjoyed researching in their colleges, and some are now keen to pursue their research skills, although they did not find it easy; most were given inadequate time by the colleges to carry out the research. Compared with traditional approaches using a team of researchers from a research institution, it was a time-consuming and costly process. In the long term, however, there are

spin-offs for the individuals and colleges involved. Documenting the process of research was an important aspect of the project.

College staff identified several key themes and findings from the questionnaire and interview data, which have implications for policy and practice. These were:

- Perceptions of further education
- Motivations to learn
- Barriers and critical conditions in learning
- Experiences of further education
- Inequality and equal opportunities.

Although the research was confined to a particular regional area, we feel that the inclusion of urban/rural and large/small colleges offering a range of adult, academic and vocational programmes provides findings that are relevant to further education nationally.

Analysis of the data revealed the complexities of colleges' interactions with their communities. Relationships with local community groups, both externally and within the college, are multi-layered and constantly shifting as policy and financial prerequisites change. Further education continually has to respond to the different demands of a heterogeneous community. Identifying the diverse community groups is the first step in identifying a potential constituency. Our research looks at how different colleges are managing to provide and enhance the lifelong learning opportunities of a range of individuals and groups.

Structure of the report

This book has two objectives: to report the research findings and to document the processes of college staff undertaking research in their own institutions. The changes experienced in further education over the past 10 years are outlined at the beginning of Chapter 1 to put the research into context. The term 'community' is frequently used but rarely defined; the chapter attempts to deconstruct and conceptualise it within the context of this project. By drawing on the survey and interview data, the communities served by further education are identified. Different communities have differing needs and perceptions of further education. The most significant contrast is between community and industrial organisations. However, all groups had incomplete and often outdated views of further education. These are explored at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 examines why both 16–19-year-olds and adults choose to study at FE colleges. Many in the study were influenced by the positive experiences of family members in further education, or by word of mouth from friends or colleagues. Motivations for learning varied by age in particular. Many adults mentioned 'getting on' in work or changing career; several mature women students stressed the importance of personal development. Young people were less positive about their choice; for some, choosing further education was a means of avoiding a boring job. Many of the barriers to learning experienced and/or perceived by participants were practical ones, some of which were external to further education. In rural areas, for example, transport was a key issue. For those on low incomes, the cost of courses was critical; community organisations made a plea for free or low-cost courses. Participants from minority ethnic groups said that racism in colleges discouraged them from learning. In relation to learning, potential students need to be able to see further education as part of a wider process of taking control of their lives and making progress along a path of career and personal development.

Students' reflections on their experiences of further education are contained in Chapter 3. Adults' experiences of returning to learn in a large institution were similar to those of adults in higher education (Bourgeois *et al.*, 1999; Merrill, 1999). Several were daunted and nervous at the start of their course, not knowing what to expect. While support from staff was viewed as important, many were critical of induction programmes. Employers had specific needs in terms of courses and

training provided by further education. Occasionally, as a study of a short course for a specific group of employers in one of the colleges illustrated, there was a mismatch between employers' expectations and those of lecturers designing and providing a course. In contrast, the needs of community organisations are wider than just learning; for them, access to and the sharing of resources and rooms in FE colleges was viewed almost as a 'right' if colleges are to be part of the local community. The message from these organisations is that further education does not always listen to community needs.

Should colleges do more to engage with local communities? The Government appears to regard this as an important part of the FE mission, as shown by recent official reports (Tomlinson, Kennedy, Dearing, Fryer and the Green Paper) on widening access and lifelong learning. It is also clear in the Government's emphasis on partnership, and in the FEFC's stress upon meeting the needs of local constituencies. Some of these wider policy implications are discussed in Chapter 4 within the context of lifelong learning. Further education is unique in providing education at all levels for both young people and adults in its local communities; its overall ethos has changed, and is likely to evolve further in the light of evidence that the FE college is becoming more of an adult institution than it used to be.

Further education is, therefore, multifunctional, striving to obtain many goals to meet the needs of its diverse communities. To achieve this a multi-agency approach is required, with adequate funding and resources. This presents obvious difficulties. Some participants felt that further education was trying to do too much, and that different colleges should focus on particular courses and groups. Others believed that market forces were fuelling competition rather than collaboration between colleges. Many staff were concerned that incorporation, the concern to be profitable and the funding mechanism had led to a decline of courses for socially disadvantaged groups and those traditionally excluded from education. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of partnership appear substantial, and there is clearly a reservoir of goodwill that can be tapped for the future.

Further education has a key role to play in the post-compulsory sector. However, this requires a stronger sense of the college's community, and how the college can build lasting relationships with it. As Kennedy points out:

> *If further education is to fulfil its potential in terms of social cohesion and economic prosperity, all stakeholders need to ensure wide involvement on the part of employers and members of the community.* Kennedy, 1997, p42

In this study, community and industrial organisations called for a partnership model with further education as a way forward to achieve and meet the needs of a wide variety of community groups.

The Appendix outlines the experiences and processes of college staff undertaking research in their own institutions. A small core of lecturers involved in the project have become hooked on doing research, particularly qualitative approaches and interviewing. The collaborative process used in this project was at times difficult, frustrating and time-consuming, but it was rewarding in a number of ways. It was a learning experience for the university, FEDA and the colleges. A series of college events disseminated the outcomes at college level.

The project has led two lecturers to undertake masters' research degrees and another to work with a colleague at Warwick and the University of Birmingham on FE-related projects. Others are keen to continue to use their research skills in their colleges. In these colleges a research culture has been established, but this has important resource implications. Busy staff may have the goodwill to undertake rigorous investigations, but they need the active support and commitment of college management. With this support, our experience suggests that colleges do indeed have the capacity to undertake a range of effective institutional research, which in turn provides an important element in the broader attempt to turn colleges into reflexive, learning organisations.

1 The FE college and its communities: past and present

The FE college 10 years ago and now

FE colleges began increasingly to vary in their nature and purpose during the 1980s. This trend continues today. Defining the philosophy and practice of further education is, therefore, a hazardous business. As one college principal has said:

> *FE colleges are not standard, bureaucratically defined institutions but rather each is a product of its own history, the policies of its previous governing bodies and local education authority, and the local demand from employers and communities.* Hall, 1994, p9

Ainley and Bailey have gone so far as to claim that 'there is, therefore, no such thing as a typical college' (1997, p8).

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and subsequent incorporation brought about great changes to further education, including a higher profile. FE colleges had previously played a significant but unassuming role in tertiary education. The popular image of the FE college in the 1980s was the 'local tech' – a place to learn a trade, especially for young, working class men (Ainley and Bailey, 1997), or to attend a night-school class for leisure, sport or a qualification.

Even by the 1980s, this was out of date. Colleges had faced the responsibility of training tens of thousands of unemployed young men and women since the late 1970s, and by the 1980s they were increasingly attracting adult returners as well. The first access to HE courses, for instance, opened in the late 1970s; by the late 1980s, more adult learners were attending colleges than were studying in LEA centres and the Workers' Educational Association combined. Nevertheless, a dated perception of the college as a place for apprenticeship training persisted.

This was combined with a vague statutory definition of further education. As Kennedy points out, 'further education is everything that does not happen in schools or universities' (1997, p1). While legal imprecision may matter little for practical purposes, it reflects a wider uncertainty among policy-makers and the general public over the finer details of further education's role and contribution.

Yet that contribution is both substantial and distinctive. As one senior manager has pointed out, by the 1980s 'colleges formed part of a broader system of local education, capable of coordination and rationalisation to provide a comprehensive service sensitive to local requirements' (Reeves, 1995, p99). The British FE system is unique in Europe. No other European country has an integrated institution for post-compulsory education that provides such a wide range of academic, vocational and leisure programmes, from basic to HE level, for both young people and adults. In Germany, for example, day-release training for young people remains the primary responsibility of *Berufschulen* (trade schools) while more general education and training for adults, including younger adults, belongs to an extensive national network of *Volkshochschulen* (people's universities).

Further education has not always had its current broad functions. Some FE colleges date back to the 19th century, with their roots in technical education for working class men. While some developed out of the self-help tradition of the mechanics' institutes, others were funded from duty raised on beers and spirits (the Whisky Tax) and managed by local councils. The Education Act 1944 placed on LEAs the duty of providing commercial, technical and arts education. It defined further education as 'full-time and part-time education and leisure-time involvement in organised cultural training and recreative activities for persons over compulsory school age' (Frankel and Reeves, 1996, p7).

Confusion about the meaning of further education is not new. In the 1960s, the balance between advanced and non-advanced work was used as a basis for distinguishing between and within FE colleges. In the 1970s Bristow described the sector as:

> *... not entirely technical education, nor are further education colleges only 'technical' colleges. Further Education embraces colleges, schools and departments of art as well as the technical and technological aspects of education. It may also include diverse aspects of education and training such as nursery, training centres, sea training schools and agricultural colleges.* Bristow, 1976, p10

A few years later Gleeson and Mardle pointed out:

> *The paradox is that in practice the term further education has come to denote the nebulous but gaping middle ground which exists between school and higher education. Therefore, although the term may officially embrace Polytechnic and Teacher Education, it does so in name only. It is perhaps for such reasons that the provision for the 16–19 age group has come to be referred to as the 'Cinderella' area of the education system. Thus, any definitive attempt to explain the nature of further education becomes, at the institutional level, one FE college is not necessarily like any other: its students, staff, curricula, administration, finance and so forth are dependent upon a variety of regional factors ...*
> Gleeson and Mardle, 1980, pp8–9

By severing colleges' links with LEAs, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 gave institutions and their governors new financial, management and administrative responsibilities. As a result, further education has evolved considerably, yet its role and function remain ambiguous compared with schools and higher education:

> *Neither have the FE colleges been recognised as part of the mainstream education system. Further education is therefore still described negatively as neither schooling on the one hand nor higher education on the other; or – still more dismissively and inaccurately – as 'non-academic', being concerned solely with vocational training rather than general education. The result of this history of neglect and marginalisation is that there has never been any agreed and generally understood assertion of the value of further education in its own right ... further education remained a local affair at most until very recently. Its achievements went unsung and were disconnected from developments in the national system of schools and higher education.* Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p4

In some quarters the dislocation and transformation since 1992 has produced a sense of crisis and threat. Shortly after the Act came into force, David Robertson argued:

> *The crisis of the further education sector has been a symptom of the crisis of national educational priorities. Since colleges have generally defined their purpose as vocationally focused, 'second-chance' institutions, they have not enjoyed the status bestowed upon academically focused sixth forms or*

universities. They have come to symbolise the rift between academic and vocational learning, between education and training, that has defined post-secondary education. This rift has, in turn, retarded our national ability to reform our provision for the benefit of the majority of the citizens.
Robertson, 1994

For our sample colleges, participation in this project offered an opportunity to reflect upon their own changing purposes and philosophy over the past decade. The project focused on the academic year 1986/87, but information from the colleges revealed that, on the whole, FE colleges were relatively stable institutions before the Education Reform Act 1988. There were some signs of curricular changes, together with some organisational changes, but further education was still firmly under the auspices of LEAs. Several had just undergone an HMI inspection.

The picture is drastically different in the mid-1990s. Changes within further education have been rapid and pervasive. Further education has been affected by the general drive in society towards a market economy. A significant change has been the achievement of a higher profile within the national education system, as 'government and business are in agreement that the FE curriculum must play a key role in improving productivity and occupational skills to a level comparable with those of other advanced industrial countries' (Reeves, 1995, p23).

How did mid-1980s colleges differ from those of today? What were the communities they served? This was before the era of mission statements; none of the colleges reported having had one. Colleges either had their own informal aims and objectives or drew on guidelines from the LEA and the Department for Education and Science. As one college researcher reported, 'the LEA was very much in control of strategic planning and development'. A few had their own college development plan by the end of the 1980s. Evesham College, for example, launched its first policy statement in June 1989:

Evesham College is a rural community college committed to serving the needs of the local population for further education and lifelong learning. The college seeks to provide educational leadership while responding to the needs of the community by providing quality educational programmes that are accessible to all who can benefit from them.

The statement is general, like others of its era, but there is an implicit emphasis on community, access and hence equal opportunities and education for learning. Interestingly it refers to lifelong learning, a popular concept in the mid-1990s.

Based in an inner-city area with increasing unemployment, Coventry Technical College produced a statement with a different tone, emphasising employment:

Coventry is facing up to this new challenge [unemployment]. *It is looking to create opportunities to build a new economic base, to maintain and develop services. In all of this the role of training, retraining and further education is crucial. The changes within the college are a vigorous and fundamental response to the challenges facing it and the city it serves.*

Policy statements became mission statements in the 1990s. The FEFC asked all colleges to produce a planning framework, to include a mission statement, a three-year strategic overview and a needs analysis (FEFC Circulars 92/11 and 92/18). Colleges were asked to take into account the educational needs of their local communities. A change in status created the need for strategic planning and a mission statement reflecting individual colleges' principles and ethos.

The mission statements of the 1990s reflect the new language of incorporation: cost-effectiveness, training and customers. As colleges became corporate entities encompassing a national framework of goals, the discourse converged (Reeves, 1995). Three colleges in this study begin their current mission statement with the same sentence: 'to provide high quality, cost-effective education and training that

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satisfies individual and corporate needs'. However, one of the three ends its statement with a reference to serving 'all sections of the community through lifelong learning'; another promises 'ensuring equal access to all sections of the community'. The access discourse of the 1990s is apparent in another college's mission statement:

> *These statements of principle are intended to inform and guide the strategic planning process and deal with lifelong learning; college responsiveness; inclusion and removal of barriers to access; development of capability in learners; ... maximisation of accessibility ...*

Several colleges described the management structure of 10 years ago as traditional, formal and hierarchical. One college explained that 'the hierarchical nature of the management structure allowed strict demarcation of budgets, areas of responsibility and centralised control'. Colleges were highly departmentalised with heads of departments playing an active role in the curriculum decision-making process. In contrast to the situation today, 'there was little integration between departments – it was empire building' (college lecturer).

Incorporation and the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 produced new management styles and structures. Managers now had to be more businesslike to survive the realities of a market economy. One college explained: 'The greater range of responsibilities of management in the college now has changed the nature of management away from primarily that of curriculum and academic leadership towards the managing of quality and funding mechanisms, responding to outside pressures.' There was a general feeling that there is now more to manage.

Further education's diverse curriculum reflects the sector's multifaceted role in serving different communities. College staff looked back on the curriculum of the 1980s as rigid, prescriptive and traditional in structure. Most students attended full-time or block-release courses. Part-time programmes were uncommon, except at one Coventry college where the students were overwhelmingly part-time. The majority in the other colleges were 16–19-year-olds or young adults.

The delivery of apprenticeship programmes to largely male, working class youths has been undermined by wider economic changes, but new opportunities have given rise to greater diversification and work with new communities. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), in its formal response to the post-16 review, pays tribute to 'the major increase in participation secured since the incorporation of colleges in 1992' (Tuckett and Sargant, 1999, p8).

The recruitment of adults was not solely a result of the 1992 Act, though; further education has a history of adult provision. Most colleges have links with HE institutions. Warwick has a curriculum link through the 2+2 degree with the Midlands colleges in this study. The colleges also have links with several other universities, some of them outside the Midlands region. Solihull, for example, has an association with seven HE institutions. Over 1850 students are currently on degree, higher national or advanced profession programmes at Solihull.

The nature of the curriculum in the 1990s is more strongly shaped by funding sources than it was in the 1980s; this has led to a substantial increase in vocational programmes. College staff in this study felt that funding constraints and the need to be profitable made it more difficult to offer programmes for low-income groups and the socially disadvantaged. However, three colleges are developing outreach centres in the community, one of which is aimed at local unemployed people. Two other colleges have expanded their geographical community as they have merged with other local colleges. Greater flexibility in the curriculum has led to more lifelong learning opportunities for adults, particularly those in part- or full-time employment.

Incorporation has prompted significant changes in staffing structures. For example, one college now has 600 part-time staff and 200 full-time staff. This can cause communication problems, as one college explained: 'this enables greater flexibility for the college and reduces its fixed costs but we need a good relationship

with [the part-time staff]'. New college contracts introduced in 1994 were divisive, with some lecturers refusing to sign them. Lecturers' work role has increased and broadened. 'Ten years ago the main duties of a lecturer grade 1 were teaching, taking registers, marking and preparation' (college lecturer), and promotion was viewed as automatic.

Some principals stated that the biggest problem was inadequate funding from their LEA. Recalling college life 10 years ago, four staff at one college related that 'there was a greater buzz around the place, stress was not in people's vocabulary, there were fewer student problems and student retention was not perceived to be a problem'.

Policies were few and far between 10 years ago, being mostly 'fairly nebulous statements of good intent' (college lecturer). Incorporation has greatly increased governors' power and influence, and hence the nature of a college's formal links with its community:

> *The governing body plays a crucial role in the overall management and direction of a college of further education or sixth form college ... Now that colleges have become autonomous corporations, the board of governors now resembles the board of directors of a company rather than a large consultative forum of the past dominated by local councillors.* Hall, 1994, p130

One college compared its governing body with that of 10 years ago:

> *The governing body acts as a kind of steering group for the college now. They have far greater responsibility and power, and check on finance, policy and a wide range of other matters. They are now there to prevent the college going 'off the rails'. The relationship with the college is now less cosy than before.*

Compared to pre-1992, community representation on governing bodies is now dominated by industrialists. A factor that has remained static is gender imbalance; in some colleges in multicultural areas, there is also ethnicity imbalance. One participating college has 14 governors; three are women, and one is Asian.

Apart from the governing body, colleges' key external links are now with industry, TECs and other education institutions, particularly schools and higher education. To a lesser extent, colleges also have links with local community/voluntary organisations and international contacts. Ties with LEAs have largely been severed, or are channelled through economic development units rather than education departments. A market economy can make it harder to promote collaboration with community groups. One college suggests that 'there is a problem with community links – there is little or no money in it'.

Links with industry are a two-way process. Colleges supply training and consultancy while businesses offer work placements and experience for FE students and staff. One college declared that its relationship with employers had improved in recent years:

> *In general there is a sense of a greater variety and number of links with outside organisations now than before. The quality of the contacts we have with employers is better now. There is more understanding between employers and the college. We are more responsive even though circumstances are more difficult for all. We are doing more for small companies – they are more important in the economy but working with them is more complicated and time-consuming.*

Relationships with schools and other FE colleges are dual and contradictory, being both competitive and collaborative. However, working with partners, including other FE colleges, was viewed as essential, particularly on a regional basis:

> *We may well need to pool our resources with other colleges, businesses and universities as there may be too many under-resourced providers chasing too few students.*

The impact of policy changes on the FE sector over the past decade has been substantial and deep-rooted, forcing a restructuring of the colleges' internal community and a reassessment and realignment with its external communities. One college lecturer reflected:

> *There was still a feeling, although under challenge, that the college could be instrumental in righting wrongs and would continue to work against inequalities. We never thought much about how we might have to compete really hard.*

Despite the changes of the last 10 years, some issues remain the same. For example, concern about the importance of and link between education/training and a vibrant economy was (and still is) a priority. In the 1970s and 1980s, as today, education was viewed as essential for economic survival:

> *In recent years politicians, industrialists and educationalists have expressed considerable anxiety about the failure of Britain's educational system to produce an adequately trained supply of technical personnel. In a proliferation of official exhortations, white, green and yellow, much has been said about the economic success of Britain's European partners who, it is held, have made economic progress because of their systematic investment in the training of craftsmen, technicians and technologists.* Gleeson and Mardle, 1980, p2

Defining 'community'

In the 1980s the notion of community was overshadowed by the rise of individualism and concerns with competitiveness. Community is, however, now reappearing on the political and academic agendas. Moreover, changing labour markets are raising new questions of social exclusion and inclusion. Government has repeatedly stressed its view that lifelong learning must engage 'the many, not the few'. Education is valued as a key to economic success, but the Secretary of State's foreword to *The learning age* also spoke passionately of learning for learning's sake and for social, civic and personal development.

Defining the meaning of 'community' for further education within the context of this project was an essential starting point. Differences in interpretation emerged at an early stage between individuals and colleges involved in the project. In particular, there was some tension between an active citizenship/social-purpose view and a more economic perspective.

To take this discussion forward, a seminar was arranged with academics giving four papers (now published as a FEDA report) that outlined differing perspectives on community:

- *Changes in FE: 10 years of turbulence*
  Bob Fryer, then Principal of Northern College
- *Connotations of 'community': implications for practice*
  Ian Martin, University of Edinburgh
- *Further education, its communities and economic regeneration*
  Glyn Owen, Sheffield Hallam University
- *For citizenship and the remaking of civil society*
  Stewart Ranson, University of Birmingham.

Clearly, defining community is problematic. Interpretations of community are influenced by ideological, political and sociological perspectives. Hillery (1955), for example, counted 94 different definitions of the term. Community does, however, imply some collective identity, and social and geographical factors are particularly important in determining that; people develop a common sense of identity by virtue of living as neighbours, in the same locality. But there are other, sometimes competing sources of identify: social class, ethnicity, values, position in the labour market, housing and income, and increasingly lifestyle and consumer choices. To have any meaning in people's lives:

The strength of community within any given group is determined by the degree to which its members experience both a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance within it. Clark, 1987, p57

In his seminar paper Martin, discussing the concept of community in relation to community education, argues:

Communities in this sense, therefore are collectivities of people – often people united in struggle or resistance – in which they collectively experience the contradiction between the possibilities of freedom (agency) and the realities of constraint (structure). The distinctive role of the 'community educator' is the dialectics of community. Martin, 1999, p12

To enable those who are currently excluded to access further education, colleges need to 'teach out' and extend proactively into their local communities (Wymer, 1996, Martin, 1999). In practice this means outreach projects, interagency collaboration and partnership. 'Perhaps the key point to make about this is that some of the college's communities will be highly visible and, indeed, vocal whereas others may well be relatively invisible and silent' (Martin, 1999, p8).

Martin emphasises the context of popular education, drawing on the pioneering work of Tom Lovett:

... in a rapidly changing and uncertain world 'community educators' are well placed to engage with the increasingly fragmented and dislocated realities of people's individual and collective experience. The real challenge ... is to forge out of this engagement more genuinely popular and democratic forms of education and, in the process, to reconnect the political culture that simultaneously respects diversity and solidarity. Martin, 1996, pp140–141

From this social-purpose perspective the FE curriculum will:

... come out of, not the expertise of the teacher or the demands of the discipline, but the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities. Its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group/collective as distinct from individual learning and development, and it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct connection between education and social action.
Martin, 1999, p12

In contrast, Owen's seminar paper is located within an economic discourse, examining the role of colleges in economic regeneration. Owen argues that the FE sector faces pressures and unfair competition owing to inequalities in funding, guidance given by schools, quality of training provision and selective recruitment of students by other educational providers. Such competition and declining funding may prevent colleges from assuming a role within the wider community. However, for Owen there are 'business opportunities in economic regeneration' as well as a 'moral onus on colleges to contribute to the economic well-being of the communities they serve' (Owen, 1999, p17). He outlines three ways in which colleges can contribute to economic regeneration:

- Through their mainstream activities, including their contribution to government-funded training, business development and student guidance
- Through contributing to the process of economic regeneration, including strategic planning
- Through their economic impact as major organisations in their own right.

Through partnerships, colleges can play a more dominating role rather than as 'a second tier of consultees'. The transition to a Labour Government, according to Owen, enhances these prospects. Participating in economic regeneration will both improve a college's financial position and benefit local communities, economically and socially.

Ranson's paper offers another perspective on further education and communities by discussing further education's role in relation to citizenship and the remaking of society. For Ranson the structural changes of the postmodern era have led to upheavals and disruptions in the lives of many people through unemployment. The fragmentation of a postmodern society, therefore, undermines the effect of communities and collective action. The central task now facing society is to remake itself through cultural renewal and communities. A learning society needs to advocate agency to enable citizens to remake the communities in which they live:

> *If the task for the time is to recreate a public domain that can support society through an historic transition then the challenge will be to learn, re-learn two indispensable capacities for cooperative action; the capacity for action, for agency.* Ranson, 1999, p30

Institutions such as further education are potentially powerful in shaping human nature through community education. Further education's task is to instil agency in learners through active learning and pedagogy. To do this colleges need to become learning organisations:

> *The purpose of further education is to develop the capacities of citizens to engage in the remaking of their societies in a postmodern world of difference ... The challenge for further education where this does not already do so is to reach out to constitute difference (social, cultural, ethnic, class, multiple [dis]abilities, ages, etc.) in the form of the institution.* Ranson, 1999, p35

Ranson therefore adopts a more liberal and postmodern approach to using citizenship, education and community as a means to create a participative democratic society within further education. His framework is pluralistic and postmodern, embracing cultural diversity and difference but with the goal of achieving political consensus within the community.

The different uses of 'community' by Martin, Owen and Ranson illustrate the problems involved in defining community; interpretations of community are ideologically and socially constructed (Martin, 1996). However, all three are optimistic about the positive role that FE colleges can and should play in their local communities. What is apparent is that further education serves a diverse range of communities. This is a difficult role to play, as colleges have to balance community interests both within and outside themselves. They can only meet the needs of different sectors (employers, community groups, women, unemployed, minority groups, etc.) in partnership with those groups. Kennedy stresses the need for mechanisms to ensure further education's involvement in providing for local community needs:

> *If further education is to fulfil its potential in terms of social cohesion and economic prosperity, all stakeholders need to ensure wide involvement on the part of employers and members of the community ... Formal arrangements are necessary to ensure that it can respond more effectively to the needs of the wider community.* Kennedy, 1997, p42

The communities served by further education: who are they?

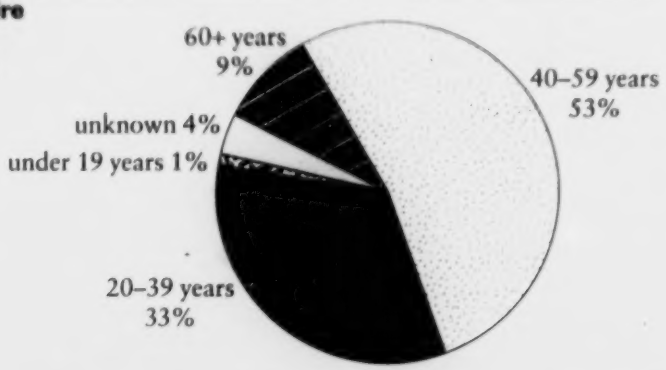
This project focused on both the external and internal communities of further education. The researchers identified broad categories of external communities: industrial organisations, community/voluntary organisations, local government organisations and other educational providers. There is a wide range of differences – in terms of size and functions, for example – within these categories. Internally, the researchers included students and all levels of staff, both teaching and non-teaching.

Of respondents to the questionnaire from external communities, 59·5% were female and 38·9% male with 1·6% not identified by gender; 93·5% were white

and 6·5% were of Afro-Caribbean, Asian or Chinese origin. In terms of organisations and groups, 224 replies were received from industrial organisations (both small and large), 229 from community/voluntary organisations and 107 from local government organisations and schools. Six respondents did not identify their organisations.

Figure 1

Age of questionnaire respondents from colleges' external communities



The nine colleges in the project serve diverse communities in terms of geography, social structures and economies. Some of the colleges engage wholly or partially with rural areas and others with urban areas, from inner-city communities to the wealthier suburbs. Some of the catchment areas have undergone economic decline and a rise in unemployment. While Coventry has seen a loss of apprenticeships and skilled manual workers as manufacturing industries have declined, the region surrounding North Warwickshire and Hinckley College has experienced the collapse of the local coal mining industry. The community of unemployed men is, therefore, a group that all the Coventry and North Warwickshire colleges have to address. Rural colleges such as Evesham have to face the problems of rural poverty. The Midlands is enriched by a diverse ethnic minority community who have particular educational needs.

As a whole, the Midlands are characterised by a low participation rate in post-compulsory education. Encouraging those who lack cultural capital to participate in education is, therefore, a large task for the nine colleges. Some of the student participants had overcome barriers to learn in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, age and disability.

Perceptions of further education by community groups

Information in this section is drawn from the survey and interview data. Participants' perceptions of further education were largely based on personal experience rather than the perspective of the organisation they represented, although some employers' responses proved an exception to this. On the whole, participants shared a narrow view of further education: it was understood and experienced in terms of the course/programme they studied.

Overall there was a positive response to studying in further education. Questionnaire data revealed that 98% of those who had studied in further education had found their course useful. In addition, 87% stated that they would recommend studying at an FE college to a friend or family member. There were no significant differences in response by organisation, gender or age. Very few participants had attended a short course of less than a week, although 60% of men compared to 46% of women attended a course lasting longer than a year whereas women were more likely to have attended a course which lasted up to a year (60% compared to 28% male).

Figure 2. Experience of study in further education: 'Would you recommend studying at an FE college?'

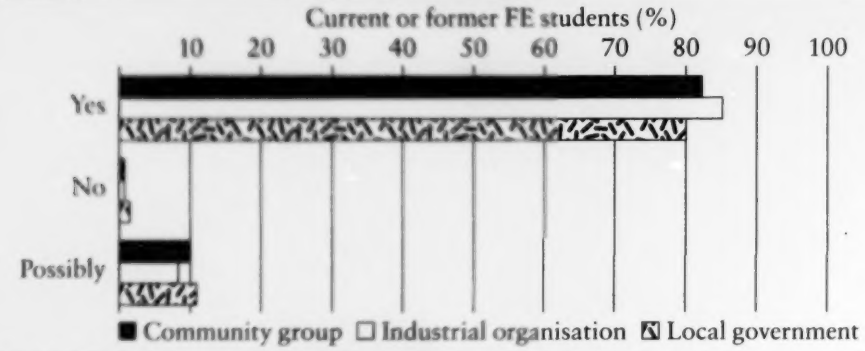
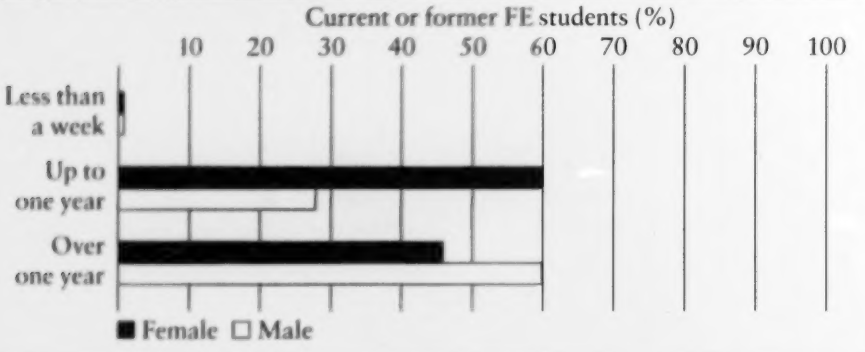


Figure 3. Experience of study in further education: duration of course attended



Several participants' comments illustrated a mismatch between what colleges are providing and what industrial organisations, community groups and local government bodies perceive further education to be doing. Colleges are changing faster than perceptions of them. This is almost certainly unavoidable, though there is much that colleges can do to raise awareness of their new role and functions.

Some people still see further education as a place for young people making a transition from school or on block release from local companies:

> *I think probably what would put people off ... I think FE colleges have got an image of being for people of the 16+ age group. It takes a bit of bottle for an older person to go in if you have not done anything for years. I tried to get my next door neighbour to go – she's housebound. She is not totally disabled and could easily go but won't ... She thinks the college is not for her.*
> Employee of an industrial organisation

> *In the main, further education colleges carry on from where schools left off if youngsters have the feeling that they want to go on – if they are going to do A-levels. The second aspect of a technical college is where you have youngsters who are sent on day release from companies and that sort of thing.*
> Travel company employee

> *I would not have thought that it would have been meeting the needs of the middle aged – the people of the estate. My perception of it is that it is a place for kids to go to after they have finished school and to do their further education, be it A-levels or whatever.* Member of a playgroup association

The last of the above participants also stressed that local parents on the estate regard further education as 'just a place for young kids to go to'.

One woman commented, 'I never really saw it as a place for the likes of me,' while a man in his 50s thought that further education was attended by 'the lower age group'. A 16-year-old male described further education as the place you go to 'if you cannot find a job and you did not do very well at school'.

Others were not aware of the move towards flexible delivery of programmes, as shown by the following comments from employers and trade unionists:

- *More courses for foremen/supervisors in the evenings as they work all day.*
- *Relevant specialist courses to run either during evenings or as distance learning.*
- *Easy access to further education timetabled to suit working people as well as those not in full-time employment.*
- *A more flexible working timetable so as to fit in with working mothers or mothers without supporting partners or families.*

One lecturer was aware of these misconceptions:

> *I think there's a lack of awareness in the local community and at the societal level. Getting the message to the local community is a big problem and I'm not quite sure how you should do it and whether there is a secret solution to get the message through ... Local people don't even know where the college is, which is amazing.*

Younger participants compared their perceptions of school and further education. Escape from the rules and authoritarianism of school to the freedom of further education was valued. Moving to further education was a rite of passage marking the transition from childhood to adulthood:

> *As a young person leaving school and going on to college, my understanding of the transformation from school to college life had been that at school your teachers are there and they tell you what to do. At college you have lecturers and they guide you – your development. It is left to you, the individual, and you develop. You attend your lectures if you want to. Basically you are an adult so you decide. The lecturers are there to help and support you.*
> Training Officer, Afro-Caribbean Women's Centre

> *At the old school you did not work because you were doing it for the teachers ... like the teachers say you have got to do this work. Here they just say, 'If you do not do the work then that is your problem'.* A-level FE student

These attitudes reflect those found by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) in their study of young learners in further education. Differences were highlighted not only between schools and colleges but between parental and students' perceptions:

> *The pupil or youth really wants to get away from school whereas it is the parents who want them to stay on. The parents are afraid that they will get into bad company. I know smoking is high, drinking is high, drugs are high, crime is high, anti-social behaviour is high. It is not the fault of the college. The college is there for everybody.*

Not surprisingly, community/voluntary groups' perceptions of further education contrasted greatly with those of business organisations. The latter viewed the purposes of further education to be largely instrumental and vocational, while community groups expressed a more collective and social-purpose view. Many employers advocated using further education for training and qualifications. There was also a feeling that there is greater interaction, negotiation and partnership between FE colleges and firms than there used to be:

> *Further education has changed very much from where it was 20 years ago – tremendously changed. In fact now much more looking to what business wants rather than laying on courses and say 'here they are, this is what we are offering'.*
> Employer

I think that it is important that they are prepared to listen to what local businesses require. I deal with certain people at further education colleges quite closely and they have been prepared to listen to what we wanted and what we need in terms of students coming to us to work and what sort of things they can do to help prepare the students better for the workplace. There is a college that I do a work experience paper for – a GNVQ student. The organisers of the course came to speak to me and discussed what sort of person I was looking for and what sort of requirements I would need. We actually developed a relationship in that I went to the college and talked to them and I talked to the students about the career path I had taken and that was great because it was a representative from an industry that they were interested in. Hotel manager

Most employers in the sample pointed out the need for further education to provide courses leading to vocational qualifications, relevant to the needs of local industries:

Serve local employment needs in respect of qualifications – internal examination. Provide national recognised qualifications based on examination – external examination. Mental Health NHS Trust

Smaller businesses held different views of further education, largely because, unlike the larger firms, they cannot afford training costs:

One of the problems with small, local businesses is that you are spending so much of your time trying to make the business work. It is very difficult to look over your shoulder and say, 'Right, we'll chuck half or one-fifth of your time away to worry about re-educating yourself and the people who work for you.' The expenditure is the problem. You have got to increase your turnover to cover the loss because it is a dead loss as far as your investment goes. OK you might get investment back in the first throw after they have had the education – to make them better employees, more useful employees. The only way you can do that is if you get grants for the industries concerned where they will get some type of pay back for taking on further training. Industrial services business manager

Similar economic problems are experienced by community organisations:

We have a high regard for the college but have not really made use of it – mainly because we are underfunded and therefore wary of costs involved in sending staff on training, but also we only have three paid staff and therefore find it difficult to find the time. From my perception the college has made remarkable progress in recent years and many of my volunteers have benefited from its courses (particularly women returners). The college, including the excellent Access Centre, already offers the local community a great deal. Vale of Evesham Volunteer Centre

Employers had mixed opinions of further education's usefulness in providing relevant training for local industry and the economy. Some expressed this in terms of a continual cultural gap between them and FE colleges, resulting in their needs not being met. Other reasons given for not using further education included poor communication and interaction between colleges and employers:

[Colleges should] *actually involve themselves in talking to local business and* [discovering] *their needs to match training and job prospects to what is actually available after college, and create courses around improvement of the businesses they are involved with.*

I know that if there are courses at X college connected, for instance, even slightly with what we are doing, we never get contacted to see if we have got anybody [who we might want to attend those courses] *so I think that it is a bit lacking*

... They have not contacted us about anything ... We have had six months when we have been struggling to get extra employees and we would also like to take on young, new staff and people who are just coming out of a college course ... We have had nobody come forward and say, 'Could we possibly be helpful to your business?' or they have not asked us to go into the college and put forward our case either ... So there is another point which I think you could [address] *– because I am sure a lot of businesses would do that ... We should perhaps be contacting colleges as well – both ways – and general information needs to be sent out – even on the social classes at night like hobbies. I do not think that a lot of people are aware of a lot of the courses. I do not think a lot of my friends or colleagues know. I think a lot of people are not aware of what is on offer.* Director of an electrical contractors

I think the colleges ought to make a determined effort to actually send people out into various industries and get a feel for them and their requirements because some people do need specialised skills provided and, therefore, I will commit myself here, when I was at X college I felt that a lot of the tutors would not have lasted five minutes in industry. Personnel officer

I have offered work experience and looked for a new staff from three colleges in the area and have never even had a reply from the textile departments!

There was contradictory evidence of whether FE colleges have the appropriate knowledge and up-to-date technology for training:

You come to the phrase 'updated skills' and there is a huge necessity – because of the training shortage about 10 years ago. Older people in businesses are having to update their skills in regards to electronics, computers, communications and the like and I think that it is vitally important for businesses to use the college because again the colleges have got the equipment and the skill and the ability to show people how to do it. Travel company

Availability of up-to-date equipment to learn on [is essential]. *For example, the Morris Minor is no longer relevant in today's vehicle technology. Some, indeed many, colleges suffer from out-of-date equipment.* Motor manufacturer

Comments were generally favourable, although negative comments were received from all sectors – mostly from local government organisations. These were often based on one individual or organisation's experiences at one FE college:

Variance between lecturers was too extreme. They were either very good or very bad or in some cases, did not turn up. Mental Health NHS Trust

Today most FE colleges are inefficient, disorganised and use more and more lecturers who are no more qualified in the subject area than the students – their expertise being out of date or in another area. The good ones are very good. District Council

Generally speaking the FE colleges I have contact with do provide value for money. It is perhaps their image and their beliefs that need improving and setting higher. Magistrates Court Service

Increasing competitiveness between colleges and the marketisation of colleges was noted by several participants:

I would like all three colleges in Coventry to complement rather than compete ... Encourage people to return to work and help in the process of linking employers with potential employees.

I do not know what colleges are doing at the moment, either it is for money or what, but you all seem to be out with your little nets trying to get people.

I have calls from different colleges like 'Can I come and see you?', 'Would you be interested in this, that and the other?'. I have people calling in from colleges trying to sell their courses or trying to persuade you to go to this college rather than that college or whatever. I do not quite know what it is – you all seem to have these marketing people now, marketing the college. I appreciate that marketing plays a big part in everything now but there seems to be this – as I said – throwing out the net trying to catch a few more people for that particular college.

Local government organisations in particular indicated that further education should rationalise and return to more cooperative attitudes, partly to reduce duplication but also to avoid competition. There was criticism of 'the smarmy salesman side of having to compete for students/funding':

[Colleges should] *form a cartel. At least some kind of city-wide forum with community representatives and all the FE providers to think strategically about the wide range of learning needs.*

Many community/volunteer organisations felt that further education is ignoring and not catering for certain groups:

I would like to see the service become more accessible to people with mental health problems and more sensitive to their needs. Social Services Department

[There should be] *wider provision of courses integrated for people with disabilities, closer working with organisations such as ourselves* [and] *disability training for staff – this is the greatest barrier to disabled people.* Care centre

Provide enabler support to people with learning disabilities to enable them to access 'mainstream' courses. Provide more care assistant support to enable people with profound disabilities to access college. A wider range of courses accessible to people with learning disabilities. Care centre

It was clear that community groups external to further education have many differing perceptions, both positive and negative, of colleges' purposes and functions. The perceptions relate to both what colleges are doing and what community groups feel they should be doing. They also reveal the multitude of demands, often contradictory, that are being made on further education.

Part of the problem is simply that colleges house a variety of resources, and make them available in a number of ways. They are no longer relatively homogeneous institutions, serving a comparatively restricted part of the community. On the contrary, potentially – and frequently in practice – colleges serve a wide range of community interests:

Colleges should ... position themselves to respond both to employment-related demand and the individual and group learning needs of community residents. The strength of the college is that it is one of the few local public sector organisations that has the facilities to respond to both. With the will to do so, and the information on where to target resources, the college becomes the powerful focus of continuing education and training opportunities for its community. Powell and Buffton, 1993, p46

2 Motivations and barriers to learning

Why do different individuals and groups decide to learn?

Learning is viewed as essential in a globalised world that is rapidly changing economically and socially. As we move towards an information society, knowledge becomes important: those who lack it will experience social exclusion (Castells, 1996). Policy-makers currently promote lifelong learning as the key to economic success and the social cohesion and stability of society:

> *As we approach the twenty-first century and the immense challenges of the global economy and unprecedented change, achieving these inseparable national goals will depend more and more on knowledge, understanding and skills of the whole population ... Those who are disadvantaged educationally are also disadvantaged economically and socially.* Kennedy, 1998, p163

In democratic societies, lifelong learning is also a means of ensuring citizenship and democratic participation in civil society (Ranson, 1994).

Opportunities for participation in education and learning have widened over the past decade, particularly for adults in further education and higher education. Adults now comprise about three-quarters of the FE student population, but overall participation in adult education is difficult to identify. The NIACE survey (Sargant, 1990) suggested that one-third of the adult population participates in some form of learning, while the National Adult Learning Survey 1997 implied that at least a quarter of adults in England and Wales do not participate (Sargant, 1997). Others claim that widening access has only attracted those who already possess educational qualifications, thus widening the gap between the educationally advantaged and disadvantaged (Kennedy, 1998).

Initial schooling continues to be a disaffecting experience for some groups, making participation in learning as an adult unattractive. Education in industrial societies continues to reproduce social inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1994, Crowther and Martin, 1999), yet education also has the potential to change individuals and society (Pascall and Cox, 1993, Merrill, 1999).

Some educationalists consider learning to be fundamental to the human being (Tough, 1979, Maslow, 1968, Mezirow, 1977), but motivations for participation and non-participation in learning are complex. Much research on motivation, such as the early work of Houle, is psychological and draws on factor analysis, grouping learners into categories. Much UK and USA research indicates an instrumental motivation as the prime reason for returning to learn (Cross, 1981). Learning is perceived as a means of improving career prospects and gaining new skills. Munn and MacDonald's (1988) survey in Scotland highlights factors such as interest and personal development. Critical incidents and life transitions in a person's biography are also important factors (West, 1996, Merrill, 1999).

Motivation to learn can also vary according to age, gender, class and ethnicity. Men generally stress a more instrumental attitude to learning, while for women personal development and interest in learning are more important. In contrast to adults, some young people (post-16) may lack motivation as parents have forced them to attend an FE college course. The introduction of the New Deal may produce a generation of new, uninterested learners, as staff perceived:

> *I think also a lot of the problems stem from the benefit rule change and that you do have this group of 16–18-year-olds who really do not want to be in education, and they have to do some sort of training or full-time education and they have to progress, so there are bound to be problems.*

Participants in this research cited a wide range of reasons and motivations for participation in further education, which can broadly be categorised as personal development, career progression, 'something different', achievement of qualifications, and enjoyment of a social or leisure activity. Life situations vary; this is reflected in motivational differences between women and men, young people and adults, and different ethnic minority groups. Motivations to learn mirror society's diverse communities. Further education, therefore, has to be able to embrace and fulfil an extensive range of expectations of learners if it is to encourage participation.

For the 16–19-year-olds in the study, the reason for choosing further education was, in some cases, less clear than it was for adults. In some ways they drifted into further education negatively as a positive reaction to not wanting to stay on at school or get a boring job. For one, 'it was a last minute decision'. Some were unaware of the courses further education offered. This supports the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997):

> *I did not know what I wanted to do ... and I sat there in a career interview ... with this form to go and play football on the new scheme, and* [the PE teacher] *said, 'That might not get you anywhere,' because it might not develop into anything, and he gave me a brochure for this college and a week later I applied ... and I was in – because it interested me – I read the brochure – what it had to offer and I thought that's what I want to do.* GNVQ Leisure and Tourism student

Others looked for a more adult environment than a school sixth form:

> *I went to school in Worcester and one of the reasons for coming here is obviously because I lived here and it's local ... I'd got friends* [in the sixth form] *who said to me, 'Going to sixth form is still like being at school.' I really wanted to go to a college. I really wanted to make a change and I know the fact that there are mature students at colleges – they've got to treat you all the same – they can't treat you like you are still at school.* Nursery nurse student

A college's location was frequently cited as an important factor in choosing to go there. Closeness to home, availability of facilities and college size were viewed as essential factors by a minority of school leavers:

> *It's a small and friendly college ... there's also good facilities and it's a good location because it's by the town and you have the leisure centre.*

> *I just knew I wanted to take A-levels and I did not want to stay on at school and so, like, this was the nearest college so it was between here and Stratford and as here was closer ...*

A small number of young people had a choice of FE colleges to attend, so open days and choice of courses became determining factors:

> *I went to an open day just after leaving school, shown round the college – all the different courses. I was already looking for one about health.* BTEC Health Science student

Family support and encouragement were motivating factors for some young people:

> *My father, my parents gave us a lot of encouragement and it was their own wish that they wanted to educate their children, so there was a lot of support and encouragement that you go and get further education and then, yes, if you are successful go onto higher education.*

> *I really think that it was down to my parents pushing me to carry on – 'Son, get an education'. I think that it would be fair for me to say that was perhaps the thinking and the attitude of a lot of immigrants – Asian immigrants in this country.*

Adult students are motivated by a different set of factors. Many working-class participants, failed by initial schooling, viewed further education as a second chance, an opportunity to prove to themselves that they were capable of studying:

> *People who have had a bad experience at schools and want to get on at my age – 47 – they want to learn something ... they've been working all the time doing the same thing and then they are out of work and they want to do something else.*

For women in particular, returning to learn represents a conscious decision to change the direction of their lives. This often occurs at a specific period in their lives, after spending time in the home childrearing. During this period the women reflect upon their past and realise that they do not want to return to a boring job. Education offers a way forward, a chance to change and a means of claiming a new identity – to become a person again. This pattern can also be found among women returning to learn in higher education (McLaren, 1985, Merrill, 1999):

> *I came down here because I was ready to go back to work but did not want to go back to my old job. I wanted to change direction completely and I came to an open day and signed up for the leisure and tourism course because it is the course that most appealed to me at the time.*

> *It's for yourself ... because when they* [children] *do grow up you're on your own again. I don't want to be left on my own, not doing anything. I watched my mum dedicate her life to us and now that we're all grown up, she's just got nothing. She's looking around and she's thinking, 'Oh, what can I do now?' I have always wanted to be a hairdresser so I'm doing this.*

> *It's for me and that makes me the individual again, being independent – not just that mother and that housewife.*

The impact and experiences of class and gender, in both the past and the present, were important in pushing adults to return to learn:

> *I left school at 15 with no qualifications of any description. I had my first child when I was 17 and my second when I was 20, just coming up for 21 ... I couldn't even decide on who I wanted to vote for in the local elections because I didn't know enough about any of the parties to be able to vote, and decided that I wasn't just going to go and vote in the same way my mother did because that's what other people did. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to know more about it. I had no idea about anything to do with politics ... but suddenly decided I was turning into a vegetable. All I could do was talk about babies and gossiping about the neighbours. I saw an open day at X College and it talked about mature students. I thought, 'Oh, I'll go and have a look at that and see what they are doing and see if there is anything there that I could do.' I went down to the college because it is our local FE college and it was daunting.*

For other adults, key trigger factors were the flexibility of FE courses and the realisation of the need for qualifications and new skills in order to compete in the labour market:

I was a district nurse prior to having my daughter, who is 12 now. I gave up nursing after she was born, and again things have moved on in certain professions. When you take, say, 10 years out, I would almost certainly have to retrain again to go back and resume that job, so I took advantage of taking a course which would train me to do something which I could then fit round a domestic situation. Beauty Therapy student

... better job prospects, because without an education nowadays you don't stand a very good chance, and also when you read the papers you don't know what they are talking about.

I'm doing hairdressing and it fits in better with my lifestyle because I've got two boys. I was in the office and I was doing more and more hours and they're not as flexible, because with this I'm going to be mobile.

I know from the students on my course that most of them want to go on to higher education and they are doing this course because they want to be teachers. They want to improve themselves and get on in life – to get a better job. I'm doing it for my own satisfaction.

Access courses in particular provided many participants with a flexible route back into learning:

I wanted to go to university because I had a chance at 18 but couldn't go. I've got my A-levels, though, and this was going to be easier because I've got two children. They are at school all day and so to go out in the evening would be more hassle and I've got the daytime free. That's why I decided to go on an Access course.

Several factors interacted at a particular moment in some people's lives:

I lost my husband five years ago. My youngest is 15 and the others are in their twenties. I never had a good education and I felt perhaps I should try again.

Others had been thinking about returning to learn but were unaware of the courses available in colleges. The push came from others, such as friends, employers or family, who had had some experience and knowledge of further education. Word of mouth rather than information from colleges was critical in these cases:

I heard from a friend at work. I've always wanted to go into nursing but I thought you had to go through O-levels and A-levels and whatever have you, and I thought that I was getting too old for that. She had done [Access to Nursing] *a couple of years ago.*

I actually heard of it through my midwife. When I had mine I said I wanted to be a midwife, but because I'd left school with no examinations I didn't think I could do it, and actually she told me about the Access course. This was when I had my daughter about six years ago. I knew I was going to have another one so I thought I'd put it off and then I just came into the college one day and got an application form, filled out the form and wrote the letter and got an interview and got accepted. The college is handy because I only live down the road.

With me it was a friend I'd met at the school, and she'd just started on the course in September. She was telling me about it. My little boy started school full-time. I had nothing else to do and I thought, 'Well, yes, I'll start at college.' I came along to see what was available. It's convenient to me because I live just around the corner.

Some adults are, therefore, still unaware that they do not need formal qualifications to return to learn. Colleges still need to communicate this message.

Cost was an important issue for many adults, both when considering returning to learn and while they were students:

> *I was thinking about joining the course. I phoned the college and they told me that it was a free course.*

For one person the decision rested upon the ethos and atmosphere of a college:

> *I looked at X College and I looked at Y too ... with having a family, obviously* [transport] *played a big part in it ... but if this had been the furthest-away college I think I would still have picked it because I just liked the atmosphere and the reaction of the students and staff here.* Leisure and Tourism mature student

A wide range of students, both adults and young people, mentioned the importance of the social side of learning, particularly meeting new people:

> *Well, making friends, basically. The socialising is brilliant. I'm going to miss that – the support you get from each other because you are so like-minded and your goals are the same.* Access student

For a group of students with learning difficulties, making friends and being in a situation where they are accepted and valued were important benefits of further education, and great motivating factors:

> *At first I didn't want to go to college because I thought that everybody was going to take the mickey out of me but I came and I loved it. I've made lots of new friends.*

Not surprisingly, employers mentioned gaining qualifications, upgrading skills and career enhancement as the main reasons for participation in further education: 'qualifications and knowledge are the way for the future'. In the case of companies choosing courses and institutions for their employees to attend, other factors also came into play:

> *From X company's point of view the choice of institution would be much more subjective because it's really all about getting what you perceive to be the most appropriate deal for the employees ... In the case of buying FE services yourself, then you would obviously be much more sort of subjective in what you're looking for and quite happy to discriminate. Sometimes the choice is actually very limited – say, in the construction skills. There's only really the one place that people can go in the area without going too far out of most people's way geographically. In the case of where there are more options, such as IT, then the selection is made on the quality of teaching, to some extent the physical location – being reasonably easy for employees to get to – and the sort of general environment. But to a large extent it is the quality of the teaching and the attitude of the organisation. We actually use Y simply because it's a particularly attractive location which is relatively close to the two sites of the company, and the groups are fairly small. There is a maximum of nine in a group and the quality of teaching has been such that there has been a very low drop-out rate. It is quite clear that the tutors have got it right in terms of their personality and teaching skills. They are obviously pitching it right as these people have been out of education for a long time. In terms of what you are getting, in terms of the learning outcomes and so on, it is actually in my view worth paying the extra.*

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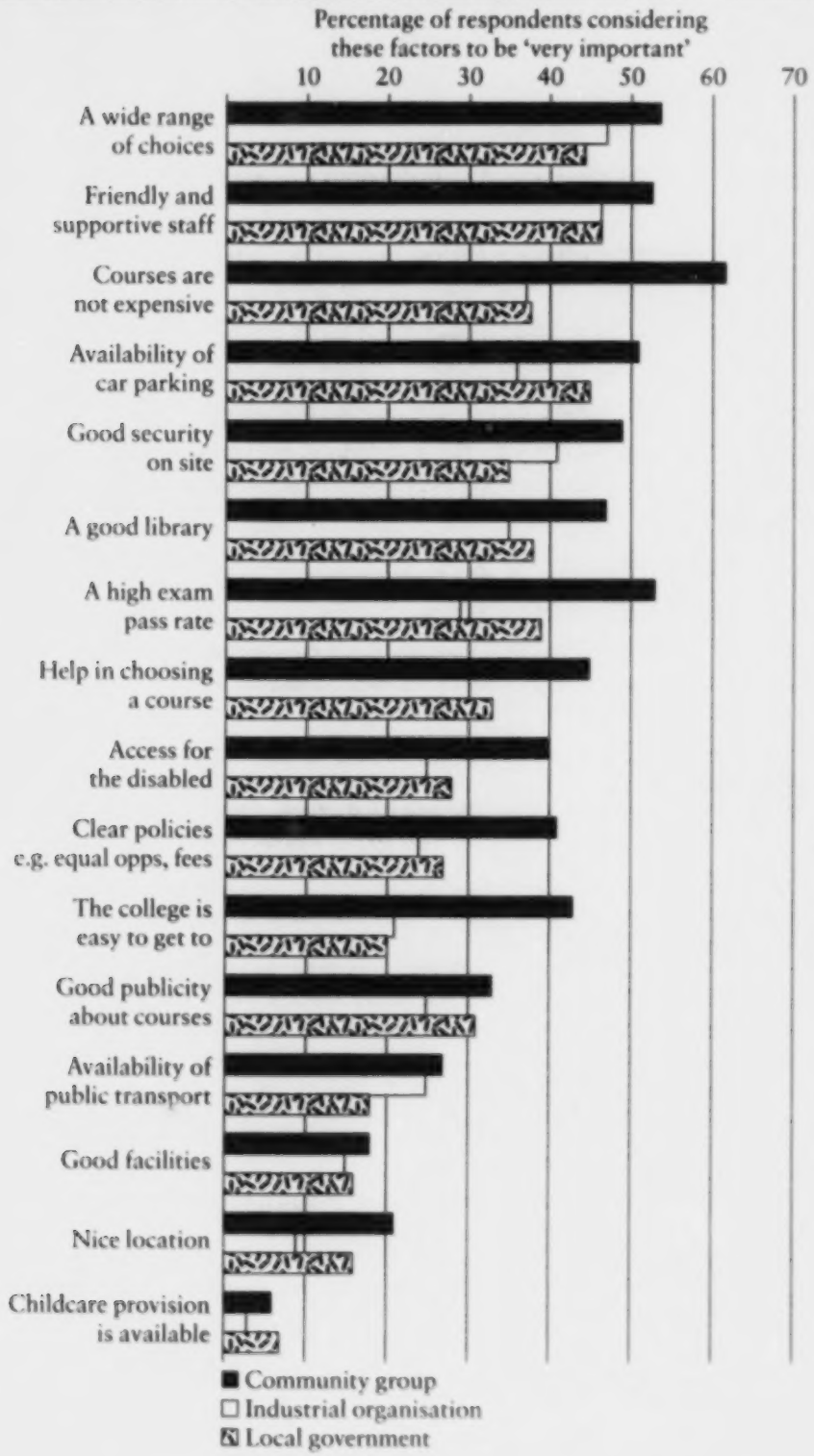
Figure 4. Reasons for participating in further education



Barriers and critical conditions: who is excluded?

Despite policies and practices to widen access, participation in post-compulsory and adult education generally remains highest among those who already possess educational qualifications and come from the higher socio-economic classes. Age also influences participation, with young people participating more. Other categories who are likely to be non-participants include some rural populations, the unemployed and urban poverty groups. McGivney (1990) identifies five adult groups: women with dependent children, older people, the unemployed, unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers, and minority ethnic groups. Drop-out rates are also likely to be higher among these groups.

Kennedy makes a strong plea for the inclusion of such groups in further education:

> *Equity dictates that all should have the opportunity to succeed in personal, social and economic spheres ... In our view, public policy for post-compulsory learning must be dramatically, systematically and consistently redirected towards widening rather than simply increasing participation and achievement. A much wider cross-section of the population needs to be involved than now.* Kennedy, 1997, p22

The barriers to attending FE colleges outlined by participants in this study largely fitted into the three categories identified by Cross (1981): situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. 'Situational' refers to learners' life and circumstances, such as lack of time or money. 'Institutional' is associated with aspects of institutional provision (for example, time and location of teaching), while 'dispositional' is linked to learners' self-perception and attitudes, such as 'I'm too old to learn'.

> *Up until recently I've always been on income support so I've got them free or cheap, so that hasn't been a problem. I couldn't afford to do them now because I'd have to pay and I'm only just out of benefit. I'm only getting just a little bit more than I was on benefits.* Woman, 30s

> *When I came here I must have thought we would have to pay for the course. I was under the impression that you'd have to pay to go to college and that was another reason why I never came. But to find out that I didn't and that they also help you with your childminding – I was amazed.* Access student

> *In the back of my head was prices of the courses ... obviously because being on the dole as well I can't afford a lot, even though I'd love to do the course there is no way that you can do them because of the prices and that's a Catch 22 position because you've got to charge for courses.*

> *It's prohibitive for a lot of people. It's OK for me, I could probably afford it but I'm sure that* [cost] *does stop a number of people in employment because they're in low paid jobs. It's whether they can fit in with their budgets, probably not.* Trade union official

Cost is also a consideration for small companies:

> *... not only because you've got to look at cost ... because if it's travel to a college then we've got to cover the cost. If it's in-house then we can provide the place, the materials and everything else, the overheads, the computers.*

An FE college's location also influences participation. Learners need to feel that they are safe and secure:

> *Walking back from there is not pleasant.*

> [Women] *are very vulnerable at that time of night and I think it would be very uncomfortable walking through the subways.* Man, 30s

For women, childcare and crèche facilities are essential:

> *My experience of being around all sorts of places is that if there's childcare then women will come and if there isn't they won't. It's really hard for women – not middle-class women. I think they have a completely different way of thinking about themselves and education. They've been brought up to expect that they will be well educated and that they will have time for themselves and that's important. Whereas working-class women for a start off have mainly been alienated from education anyway, so they aren't going to prioritise it and they're certainly not going to pay someone while they do a course because they probably couldn't afford it anyway. So if you want to get women involved then you've got to provide childcare.*

A centre leader at one of the college's outreach centres stated that most of their learners are women. The group that is difficult to reach is unemployed men:

> *I know that there are a lot of them out there who maybe think that we are still here for women and that education isn't for them – that they don't need it. They left school 25 years ago and what good is it going to do them now. It didn't do them any good then – it's getting across to them.*

A small number of participants, who viewed education in vocational terms, felt that they were too old to learn:

> *I know we've had the stuff come through the door. I've looked at them but there's a lot of stuff in there. I feel I'm too old to go for them now – work wise. It would take me a few years to get the qualifications I need and if I got them I would be too old then to go for the job.*

The ethos, the environment and the availability of support and guidance on initial contact with a college were important for one person:

> *I'd got to the open day with my daughter, three-years-old, and walked through the door and there were young people everywhere – 16- and 17-year-olds just everywhere and it felt like they were all looking at me as I walked through the door, as if to say, 'What the hell is she doing here?' I felt old. I was only 24 but I felt old compared with these young people in there. There were sort of directions to where the enrolments were happening in the main hall, so I went down there and there were lots of desks. Again it was people everywhere. I didn't know whether to stay or go at this point because it was a bit scary, because I couldn't find what I wanted. I wanted somebody to talk to about what I was going to do because I hadn't got much of an idea. I eventually saw a thing about mature students and I thought, 'Right, I'll get over there,' and it was a little oasis in the middle of all this hustle and bustle.*

Some of the colleges are situated in multi-ethnic areas. Institutional racism can act as a barrier to participation in further education; certain black groups, such as Afro-Caribbean men and Bangladeshis, are also less likely to continue in post-compulsory education. A training officer from Coventry Racial Equality Council explained:

> *That's what the black community will look for in terms of [an FE college's] credibility, and say, 'Look, if I go to this college I'm in good hands.' They will have the confidence to come to you. If they find that you are treating black people differently they won't come to you. How hard you try they will not come in to you. I know there are some bad incidences at the college in terms*

of fight' – youth fights. I hear all about it and I get involved sometimes. The police usually consult us on that.

Rural community groups pointed out that to avoid exclusion and enable potential students to access colleges, further education should either provide transport to colleges or establish outreach centres for rural communities. There was also a strong feeling among respondents that the disabled are generally excluded from further education:

What is required is an attitudinal change. Although the FE college has become accessible in the physical sense, it is not so in respect of actively promoting and encouraging disabled people to become involved in courses.

Several college lecturers expressed a concern that the new funding mechanism and the move towards marketisation will inevitably exclude marginalised groups from all but a minority of colleges committed to equal opportunities and community education:

If further and higher education is to engage more positively with local communities, institutions need to move beyond the loaded language of the market and an over-reliance on top-down funding mechanisms like franchising. If a mission to serve the community and to foster equal opportunities is to be more than rhetorical window-dressing, colleges must have an institutional commitment and a theory of educational practice which informs college action, performance and staff development and so guards against an all too easy economic and market reductionism which says, 'Of course, we'd like but we can't afford to'. Johnston, 1993, p34

Many community organisations argued for the inclusion of non-participants and excluded groups:

Be more receptive and provide specific provisions to meet the diverse needs of the community, especially those who are at a disadvantage such as women, youths and under-educated adults. Asian Youth Association

One college in this study, strongly supported by its principal, has a clear commitment to its local community. A manager at one of its outreach centres described one of its strategies:

What's been new for us during the past year is that we received a grant from the Community Education Councils ... which enabled us to employ community development workers, and their brief was to go out into the community – not necessarily looking to transfer people in the communities into students in classes. The brief was very clear and backed by the principal, that it was to empower people in the community to look after themselves, and to enable them to access facilities on college sites wherever they may be.

Colleges need to have an institutional strategy – covering course publicity and admissions through to the curriculum, teaching approaches and progression and exit – that embraces and promotes, in policy and practice at departmental and institutional level, the inclusion of marginalised groups in the community:

Increased participation should be a concern of the whole college. All departments should make their programmes accessible to the widest possible range of students and increase participation through supporting the learning of less confident students. Increased participation is not simply a matter of providing for more separate specialist groups. McGinty and Fish, 1993, p83

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3 Experiencing further education as a community

Colleges are located within communities, but as institutions they are also communities within themselves. Like all institutions they have a social system that operates at the meso and micro levels. The structure is hierarchical, with each individual and layer having clearly defined roles. Behaviour is also governed by rules, regulations, policies and practice. Social interaction occurs between and within groups – for example, between staff and students and between staff and senior management.

An FE college has clearly defined goals and missions, which determine its ethos and culture. These goals and missions vary, producing a range of college types. Some colleges may be committed to democratic and egalitarian values that promote social inclusion of marginalised groups in the community; others may lean more towards market values and closer links with local industry. No college, however, remains static as values and missions change in response to internal and external pressures.

All institutions work towards the integration and cohesion of their members through either democratic or autocratic means. Experiences of both staff and students will therefore vary according to the culture and context of a particular institution. In defining culture I draw on the work of Clarke *et al.*:

> *We understand the word 'culture' to refer to that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give expressive forms to their social and material life-experience. Culture is the way, the forms, in which groups 'handle' the raw material of their social and material existence ... A culture includes the 'maps of meaning' which make things intelligible to its members.*
> Clarke *et al.*, 1976, p10

Within the dominant culture of the institution as a whole there are a number of subcultures (such as subject departments, mature students and clerical staff), each with its own values, attitudes and ways of behaving:

> [Subcultures] *are smaller, more localised and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks ... A subculture, though differing in important ways – in its 'focal concerns', its peculiar shapes and activities – from the culture from which it derives, will also share some things in common with that 'parent' culture.* Clarke *et al.*, 1976, p13

Views from staff

Staff – mostly lecturers and middle management rather than senior management – who had worked in further education for over 10 years talked about the changes brought about by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. The impact of incorporation and the move to marketisation were key issues discussed by staff. One result of incorporation was the increased competition for competing markets.

The 1992 Act led to greater internal control – at the price of greater isolation and fragmentation of services, which will 'uncouple the existing mechanisms for ensuring coherence, access and progression throughout a range of local opportunities' (Field, 1988, p17). Competition between colleges for markets and students was viewed as a detrimental step, particularly by those in the three Coventry colleges. Catchment areas of students have widened. One lecturer at a Coventry college competed for students from industry in Stratford and Banbury. Another explained:

> *I think we'd have a much greater impact if we were working together than working separately ... it must be quite confusing for* [potential students] *to have all these people saying, 'Well, you should be doing this.' I think that if we adopt an approach where we try and sell things together and do things together, it would be much more successful. All the colleges are trying to get the same students and it's just not working – there's just not enough students out there to go round all the colleges and we're all competing for the same areas. I wondered whether the colleges are putting an awful lot of effort into competing for those cuddly four- to five-GCSE students who are really nice and cause no trouble ... when if they gathered their efforts together they could have those students for less effort and use some of that effort elsewhere for students who wouldn't normally be so ready to come into colleges.*

Many talked about the impact of market forces:

> *The big change has been the fact that we're so market-driven now. If you create a market, that's not going to promote a community ... the market has been here for quite a while now but it's more emphasised in further education. If you are driven merely by market forces you're not going to create the same type of community – the staff are not going to feel the same way about the role that they have ... If they don't deliver, the market will gobble them up and a lot of people do feel that way, that there's too much of a competitive edge emerged rather than honing people to improving them and ensuring that they deliver quality. They could actually end up doing the reverse.*

> *I personally think they've become totally money-orientated, which is understandable. They're now in business and they have to make a profit. The profit side is now all-important, to the loss of the students. Years ago the most important thing in the college was the students and I think they've lost it. They think the student – getting a student through the course – is all-important now only because they get money for it whereas years ago there was some kudos in getting a student qualified and through a course.*

Some outcomes of incorporation were viewed positively:

> *There's been a great change in the culture overall. Quite positive in the sense that every student that comes through these doors, we've got to make sure that they achieve something by the time they leave and that's focused people's energies and minds very considerably. There may, though, be a tendency to become overwrought where everybody is just reacting to everything and there's not much time to be reflective. However, the college is growing. The results are improving and so we all have to say on balance there's been more positive than there has been negative.* Full-time lecturer

All staff – lecturers, support staff and clerical – believed that there is some feeling of community within an FE college. For some, incorporation has brought about fragmentation in a postmodernist sense; there are now a range of communities, and individuals only interact with a small number of those communities. Life within the institution is viewed from the perception of limited and fragmented communities rather than relating to the institution as a whole. Life is largely lived within the boundaries of academic departments, despite the increase in cross-departmental initiatives:

I think that's a problem because I don't feel that the college is a community. It feels quite fragmented to me. It doesn't feel like a whole college. Every department is fairly separate from the other.

Asked whether she had a picture of what goes on across the college, one lecturer replied:

Not enough. I understand certain things because of the staff room I'm in, where different curriculum areas meet – so you can understand a little bit. It's not a big college, but even so there are areas that I've never really been into and I don't know what goes on there. So yes, I do tend to live in my little world. I don't necessarily want it to be that way. There seem to be certain perimeters.

Another respondent talked about fragmentation among student groups:

There is a community. There's also communities within communities and I just wonder at times. If you go into the refectory you do see different social groupings – ethnic groups – separated by physical barriers. One group sitting over in the corner may be Asian. There may be another group in another corner who may be goths or rock 'n' roll fans or whatever. So in that respect there are factors that actually lead to division. With adults, if there is a division it's unwitting in the sense that they are on different programmes so they may never meet. Therefore they've developed an intimacy with a smaller group – and those little, smaller cells, they're quite fine within the college context. That's fine. They're on a course and they may feel that they don't really want to expand their horizons beyond their own group – their small group is all they want to know and that's what they stick with.

All acknowledged that the student clientele has changed over the past few years. Vocational courses for younger students are expanding while A-level teaching is in decline. Adults increasingly dominate student numbers in many colleges. For some staff, teaching younger students is perceived as being more difficult now as the number of disaffected 16–19-year-old students has risen. In some cases this is related to issues of competition with schools and sixth form colleges:

On the secretarial side the students that come in now – even the secretarial girls – are nowhere near the sort of students we used to get years ago. I think the schools keep the better students. The schools have taken over a lot of the courses that were initially college-orientated – NVQs, GNVQs ... FE colleges are picking up the bits that schools don't want and that has an effect, that the students we get are nowhere near the quality educationally.
Business administration lecturer

I think the role is at the moment – apart from trying to find courses for mature students – we tend to be mopping up people from schools who aren't very successful and that I'm not very happy with. I'm not very happy with the present system.

Others felt that changes in the labour market had led further education to become a dumping ground for young people, and that standards were falling:

The motivation is not there a lot of the time. I think it's also the fact that jobs are not available for students when they leave school, and what they do is that they come to college because there is nothing else.

Years ago you had a choice – you could either go to college or you could get a job if you particularly wanted to earn money at 16 – if you were fed up with education, you could do that. If you wanted to make a career for yourself, you could stay on at school or you could go to college,

whereas now they don't have that choice. They've either got to come to college, stay on at school or go into YT training, so for some it's 'Oh well, [an FE course is] *better than YT training.'*

Similar views on the quality of students were held by lecturers in Ainley and Bailey's (1997) study. One lecturer who provides training for industry also felt that there is a motivation problem with young people sent on FE courses by their companies.

Teaching mature students was discussed in more positive terms. Mature students were thought to be more motivated and enjoyable to teach, bringing their own experience to the learning process:

Most of the students we have here at the moment are actually mature students ... To start with, when you have mature students they are generally of a different nature because they're committed and they generally want to get on and progress. They're very much more capable of working on their own. They don't need much guidance. I find it's more of a tutorial process. It's much calmer and a big contrast between teaching GNVQ Intermediate and the HNC.

Many respondents, from admissions officers and lecturers to marketing officers, felt that further education serves some communities better than others:

I think the big success story of the last few years has been the adult returners. It's increasing in numbers and there's still a lot to do in that area. I wonder about the older age groups – the early-retirement and post-retirement. I'm not sure about the 16+ – it's a very competitive area ... I think it needs a lot more thought. I suppose the low-response sort of areas tend to be the low-income areas or the disadvantaged groups and the unemployed, possibly, who tend not to respond. Trying to increase participation rates of the lower social economic groups is one of the issues that we need to probably address.

I think we make a very good job of serving the unemployed and people who want to retrain. We certainly have got our message out now about our admission entitlements and all the provision that there is here for people to come and get jobs. Those who want to come here get qualifications to get jobs, but I do think there are certain areas that we are simply missing out because we don't want to single them out – because we don't want to be seen as prejudiced – but they want to be singled out. They want to be told that courses are specifically for them, like senior citizens. I get so many people asking me. They look at the prospectus and say, 'I am too old to come to college,' or 'I want to come to an evening class; will it be all young people?' There are a number of people in their 30s and 40s asking that question as well, 'I'm 37; am I too old to come to college?', so there's obviously a message not getting across. Admissions officer

Some of the colleges have outreach centres in the local community. These centres' structure and ethos of working differ from those of the main sites, largely in order to attract people who have been out of education for a long time and are normally excluded groups. Staff have a direct and overt role in working with local groups. In many ways the work in the outreach centres is closer in nature to community development/education work than it is to mainstream further education. It is less affected by the ideology and practice of marketisation, focusing instead on empowering and changing individuals and their communities. As Martin explains:

This construction of community education held out a vision for the development of education as a locally delivered public service that was the antithesis of the fragmentation and competition of a marketised system. It also sought to engage policy development with the local context in a systematic way, recalling Henry Morris's concern to ground education in the community. Martin, 1996, p138

Ways of working in the outreach centres were described:

> *The kettle was always on, and that was important to encourage people back who lacked courage or self-esteem and want to get back into education but want to do it in a gentle way so that they are less threatened ... I've been to Mansetter which is a mile-and-a-half away from Atherstone town centre. If you talk to a lot of people in Mansetter they feel that Atherstone College is not for them because it is not in their community. We've endeavoured to put classes on for them in their locality.*

The outreach centre manager identified two main groups who attend the centre:

> *We have those that come in during the day and they might be either unemployed or they are looking to update their skills to go back into work, or they come along for the social side. Then there are the students who come in during the evenings, who work during the day and know exactly what they want. There is still a domination of women students but there are differences among age groups, minority groups, young people. The men that we recruit have either taken early retirement and come to do a leisure course like Art and Design ... or they come to do the computer courses. The female students – I would say the majority are thirtysomething. The children have gone to school and they are looking to update their skills or change direction altogether, and so they come to us for qualifications.*

Another centre manager outlined its relationship with the local community:

> *The communities we serve – for us it's anybody, anywhere at any time, so it ranges from people in isolated rural communities ... where people find it very difficult to get to the main site. The communities range from single parents, adult returners to the unemployed. Increasingly we are working with older groups. We're doing a lot of reminiscence work in old people's homes and sheltered accommodation. We work with a whole range of minority ethnic groups – Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Afro-Caribbeans – offering a range of training. We're looking at supporting parents who are volunteers in schools ... if people come to us with an idea or things they want, then we would look to provide them with the service they need.*

Staff were aware that external communities perceive further education in different ways:

> *I think it depends which community you ask. For the community that has been through here, such as women returners, some of the people who have been on courses here, they will think that we are marvellous. I think that we have a very good reputation with a lot of the people that have been through here. People I speak to are very positive about the college. We're very welcoming, we're very this, we're very that – all the things you want to hear. If you ask certain sectors of the business community, they think that we are a complete waste of space.* Marketing manager

A lecturer who works closely with industry explained that small companies are easier and less impersonal to work with. On the whole, larger firms are not interested in FE colleges training their employees, as the firms have the resources in-house.

Many staff talked about the changes – and deterioration, as they perceived it – in their working conditions since incorporation. Some felt that it had affected their willingness to look proactively for new student groups in the community:

> *A lot of things have changed since incorporation and since contracts have changed. I think that to get out into the community then we need to go during unsociable hours to access different groups of people. Staff have been very much more unwilling to do that sort of thing since changing the contracts.*

They say, 'Well, I've done this,' and 'I'm not going up to such and such to do this.' I think that has had a big effect. Staff are not so willing to make those links because it's something extra; they have to find extra time to do it. I think that the college has to do a lot to change relations in the college with its staff before they can actually make big steps into the community, because we need cooperation within the college for us to be able to go out and do that.

In looking to the future one lecturer stated:

I think, as they call it, the 'crisis of further education' is probably the main issue that we have to overcome in the next few years, and obviously there's a lot of politics in that. I think the margins are so tight at the moment that there is no sort of flexibility in the system. I think staff are feeling quite a lot of stress and strain at the present time, and job insecurities and things are looming quite large and at the moment there doesn't seem to be any end to this period of permanent revolution that we're going through – this cultural revolution. I would say that this is the main issue at the moment and it's very difficult to see exactly where further education is heading in the future and there are a lot of unknowns I think which are a concern ... Ultimately it comes down to funding.

Others were more positive.

What always amazes me over the years is how responsive staff are to changes, and whatever is thrown our way we respond to very positively and usually come up with the goods. We do a really excellent job at the end of the day and provide the students with what they need, want and require so in that sense I feel positive. I think further education has shown by its record that it can do the job.

Another enthused that 'one thing further education is really, really quite brilliant at is providing second chances, third-chance opportunities'.

Staff held a general feeling that, on the whole, things had been better before incorporation. Much of this may be a collective romantic memory rather than a reflection of reality, but it clearly shapes staff attitudes and behaviour towards different student groups and contacts with local communities. Many would like to work more with those who are socially excluded, but feel constrained by the forces of privatisation and the need to bring in money to the college. Powerless and low-income groups cannot offer this. As Barrow laments:

The Act may increase the preponderance of full-cost courses at the expense of the less financially attractive, with management perhaps concentrating their energies on the development of full-cost courses rather than seeking to meet minority needs. Barrow, 1991, p124

Time is another constraining factor as workloads have increased. Several lecturers made a plea for senior management to give more time and priority to reaching out into the community.

Life in further education: the student perspective

Students heard about courses at colleges in a variety of ways: open days; school; careers officers; word of mouth from friends or relatives; and publicity through leaflets, local newspapers or television. Some ended up in further education through choice, others because parents or employers sent them – it was viewed as better than a low-paid job or school – or through the youth training scheme.

The FE student population is differentiated by age, gender, class, disability and ethnicity; analysing student experiences of further education is therefore complex. A 17-year-old student's experiences have not been the same as a 35-year-old's. Women and black students may experience college life differently from men and

white students. The student world of the college has to be looked at from a multitude of perspectives.

One person explained how previous experience of a course shaped the way he now chooses an educational institution:

> *It was in the local paper they have at the end of August with the full list of all the courses. You have to look at all this because there are so many different colleges and schools offering different courses that you have, like, that in order to be able to sort it out. Having said that, I've always given preference to the larger institutions, particularly X college or Y college, to take a course at because in a way I think that they are more serious. The courses at schools, I found – I have been to one – folded up due to lack of support, so I've always gone for the larger institutions who have the bulk of knowledge – people actually teaching the subjects in the daytime, full-time for examinations as they know their stuff.*

Students' recollections of admission revealed that colleges' keenness to recruit students sometimes leads to inconsistencies between their initial advice and the practice of recruiting individual programmes. For employers:

> *There are issues, I suppose, about the extent to which courses are 'sold' as opposed to the real bare truth or whatever being given out. I do get quite uncomfortable just getting a sales pitch. The business is agreed, then it's all sort of passed down.* Training manager, large employer

> *Obviously the flexibility to be able to do courses at the time employees can attend is a basic requirement. I just try and look for individuals that I feel I can work with – where it becomes apparent that the tutors working with the employees are genuinely interested in people/students – because that seems to be what really makes a difference at the end of the day, people coming away feeling good about their experiences in further education.* Training manager, large employer

Younger students were surprised to find that the admissions process was informal and undemanding:

> *I got very much the impression that at the interview they will say anything at all to get you to go to that college. If you say you are a Martian, they will tell you that there are Martians at the college already and that you would get on very well with them, or words to that effect.* Male, aged 16

> *Well, it was really informal and it was just like a sort of chat.* Student group aged 16–17

For adult students, returning to learn in a formal institution is a daunting experience, whether in further education or higher education (West, 1996, Merrill, 1999); many participants described it as 'frightening'. Although FE colleges are more local, smaller and more informal than HE institutions, many adults said that it took them a few weeks to adjust to their new social situation:

> *When a person moves into a new interpersonal setting, a major problem he faces is understanding the setting and coming to terms with its demand. He must develop a workable 'definition of the situation'.* Wheeler, 1967, p60

The student role had to be learnt: 'I was frightened actually because of the unknown – I just didn't know what to expect because when I was at school I didn't like it'. Many adult students have to learn the language of academic discourse while at the same time familiarising themselves with the culture and behaviour of a new institution. The first few weeks are about coping and survival. Drawing on Becker and Strauss's (1959) concept, we can say that they are going through the process of situational adjustment to deal with the problems of change in an institutional setting:

The person, as he moves in and out of a variety of social situations, learns the requirements of continuing in each situation and of success in it. If he has a strong desire to continue, the ability to assess accurately what is required, the individual turns himself into the kind of person the situation demands.
Becker and Strauss, 1959, p279

A group of women Access students described their initial experiences:

It's nerve-racking walking through those doors for the first time. I walked through the door and thought, 'What the hell am I doing here?' You know, 'Why am I here?' I was petrified ... right through the first six weeks. I couldn't settle down at first and then I did.

I must have had reservations when I first started – talking with all these big words. I didn't understand a thing that was being said. I had a dictionary by me all the time. I started in 1995 but I left two months after because I just thought I didn't have it in me to do it and that was it, so I left. Then, of course, I felt a failure so I came back the following year and I was determined to stick at it for a year and finish the course, which I did.

When we actually started the lessons and the lectures and everything, big words kept cropping up, but the second time around – the first time around I was too frightened to say anything, to say that I couldn't understand it – but the second time around I did. I said, 'I can't understand this, you know' and I found the tutor a great help.

Experiences of tutor support varied:

I think at times some tutors may feel you don't need support, you're grown women. You can get on with it but it doesn't mean that we can just go along and do this essay and that essay without thinking. I need somebody to check it over, to check I'm doing the right thing. I still need reassurance. I think sometimes we end up being left in the dark because they think, 'Oh, you can get on with it'. BTEC P/T student

Others in the group talked about the way all the students on the course motivated one another. The woman who left and returned felt that the lack of group support had been a critical factor in her leaving the course. She had felt isolated. Peer-group support, rather than tutor support, appeared to be the dominating and essential ingredient to sustainment:

The first time around the group I was with – they were nice people but they weren't chummy. You weren't friends. Whereas this time around we are and we're pushing one another to do it and we've done it, and I think if it hadn't been for my mates here I couldn't have done it. You come in, have a cup of coffee, you have a fag and you talk and everybody is fine. You think, 'Oh no, it's another day – we're alright, come on, let's just get into the lecture and get it out of the way.' The first time around it wasn't like that. You would just sit on your own in the canteen, basically, but this time around everybody is a lot closer.

As the Access course progressed, their self-confidence in learning developed. In the process their definition of the self was changing:

It's like yesterday. I've got an essay that has to be in for tomorrow – sociology. Now I thought, 'My God, social mobility – what is it?' I didn't even know what it was. I was looking it up in the dictionary, what social mobility was – looking up social and then looking up mobility. I just felt so thick. Anyway, once I got on with it I started it and finished it. I've just got to write it out neatly now. I did that all in one day and I thought, 'How the hell did I do that?', and it was because I was under pressure. I knew I had to do it.

Another outlined the contradictions of learning. Like many adult learners, she had become institutionalised by the end of the course:

> *It's enjoyable mental baggage, isn't it? You know what you get from college. You get all your assessments out. Once you've done your essay or whatever, you feel so good when you've completed it. It's like a weight lifted off your shoulders and you get a Level 3 for it. It's like, now I've finished the course, although I'm so happy – I feel like a weight has lifted – I'm upset as well because I don't want to leave.*

External support from family and friends was generally lacking for adult students and some younger students. Women in particular have to struggle and cope with many roles, domestic commitments and often hostility from partners (Edwards, 1993, Merrill, 1999). In these situations, support from within the college community becomes all the more important:

> *I have had no support from my partner whatsoever. In fact, my partner told me he would be very surprised if I passed the course. He would be very surprised if I actually finished the course, so that made me very determined. And whether I passed or failed at the end, I was determined I was going to stick the course out just to prove him wrong.* Access student

Some BTEC students stated that they had no support from their parents: 'just not bothered what I do', 'I just don't talk to them about it'. This, however, was not always the case: 'My parents give me a lot of support because they always want to know what I'm doing at college.'

Lecturers and teachers enjoy teaching adults for a number of reasons: they are motivated to learn and bring life experiences with them to the learning, and they are also of a similar age group. The barriers and boundaries between teacher and learner are less prevalent:

> *The teachers all come out with us. We have our evenings out and they all come out with us and they're all on the same level as us. I always feel that anyway, even when they are in the classroom with us. They don't talk down to us. They talk on the same level as us so I don't feel dominated or anything. I don't feel thick.*

Entering college as a 16–19-year-old with learning difficulties is also traumatic, but a group of students explained how induction days and the support of tutors eased the process:

> *I think it was having all the lecturers and tutors coming to us and explaining what was happening, what was going to happen and saying, 'If there's any troubles, come to us and we'll chat about it,' and being shown around the college and feeling happy about where you are going to be for the next two years.*

Some A-level students also remarked that they were initially nervous:

> *When I first started here I was quite apprehensive because it was, like, huge but it is sort of a release because I just hated school so much that to come here and actually be treated like a human being – it was just really so different and I really started enjoying it, but the size of it and all the people around was pretty scary at first.*

For many 16–19-year-old students, further education was a more positive experience than school:

> *I find it so much easier. My course is assignment-based and you do modules and you have to work continuously. You know you've got to get it done and you do it. Your tutors are always there to help you and there's so much.*

If you go to them and say, 'Look, I'm struggling with this,' – at school you might get detention or something but here they help you. If you can't make a deadline for some reason or whatever, they're just going to help you and make it better for you. It's better because you have to motivate yourself and work at your own pace.

A-level students also welcomed FE teachers' attitudes:

They're still better than teachers at school because here it is things like first names. The people here talk to you. You actually see them as people, crack jokes.

I wouldn't feel funny about going after a lesson to their office and asking them about a question. Whereas at school it would be like, 'Oh my God, I've got to go and see a teacher,' here if they want to see you it's because they want to ask you about something, but at school it was because you were in trouble.

The younger students were aware of other forms of support in the college, but did not make use of them for fear of being stigmatised and labelled 'thick':

We had assessments at the beginning of the year on how our skills were and a lot of people needed to go to Learning Support but no one bothered. They thought it was a joke. Everyone was going, 'I'm not going to Learning Support,' because we had a lad last year who wasn't that clever and he went and it did a lot for him. Because of that they all thought, 'No, it's just for people who are thick really.' They wouldn't go and it must have been about half our group.

One explained how further education increases self-confidence:

It makes you a different person. When you first come here, the first day, you sat there in the class and everyone was – just sat there. Everyone was silent. No one knew anyone. It just makes you a different person. Over the next month or so everyone gets to know everyone. Everyone was friendly, more confident about themselves.

Beside the formal learning and social experiences, students of all ages commented that further education was a valuable experience as it promoted cultural understanding of the diverse groups in the college and society at large:

I think one of the best things was actually in terms of diversity. It wasn't just Asians, there were a few Afro-Caribbeans. I specifically remember two lads, one Afro-Caribbean girl and maybe also learning about Irish and Scots and Welsh people.

It is very much a growing-up experience. Growing in the sense that you're out in the real world. You make contact. You're tackling everyday issues. You try to learn how to perhaps become a good citizen. Man, 30s

A mismatch of expectations: a case study of a short course

A survey of a short course at one college revealed a mismatch of expectations between college staff, employers and students. The course, Institute of Supervisory Management – Introductory Award Programme, aimed 'to provide an introduction to the basic knowledge and skills necessary for supervisors to carry out their responsibilities efficiently and effectively. The course will enable supervisors to increase awareness, gain confidence and develop practical skills which can be applied in the workplace'. Lasting 10 weeks, it covered topics such as communication, managing people, managing resources, legal issues and personal development.

Researchers at the college interviewed the course manager before and after the course, as well as students at the beginning, middle and end of the course. The course manager explained:

The course is part of an increasing drive to attract business users to the college, and reflects the realisation of college staff that some participants on higher-level courses had struggled and needed a lower entry point. This is a new course aimed at a particular company with a large number of employees (35) in the town ... the intent of the course is to enable participants to understand their current supervisory behaviour in a broader context and understand their strengths and weaknesses. It is not aimed to increase or develop skills.

The employee student group was small (five) but enthusiastic, with three students in middle-management roles. At the outset some had high hopes ('hoping to be a better manager'). Training had previously been on the job, but the company was now trying to formalise its training and development to more professional standards. All the students were voluntary attendees who hoped to gain management skills, in particular people skills, and 'to get more experience'. There was a strong motivation in getting a qualification, which would help them with promotion either inside or outside their company.

At the start of the course, all the students assumed that role play would be a major activity and that people skills would be a key ingredient. They hinted that they would be disappointed if the course consisted mainly of lecture-style paper work as they could not see themselves concentrating during long lectures. They also expressed reservations about their ability to cope with the work and the assessments: 'it's a long time since we were at school ... it's quite a daunting thing'. Most had left school with minimal qualifications and worked their way up through the ranks, although some had attended part-time courses since leaving school.

Comments halfway through the course revealed: 'So far so good, but a lot of it has just been scratching the surface.' 'I think it's gone pretty well. I've learned a lot, I think.' Some were critical of one tutor's teaching style, but this was resolved. However, they did feel that the course was trying to cover too many topics in insufficient depth. Some of the content was regarded as interesting but not relevant to the workplace.

By the end of the course, one student had dropped out owing to discontent with the content. All remarked that it had been too academic and theoretical, focused more on knowledge than skills. They had expected it to be more hands-on. Before the course the students had intended to progress to a higher-level programme; by the end of the 10 weeks this was no longer the case:

I don't personally think that there was any part of this course that was confidence-building. If you didn't have the confidence to start with, you weren't going to get it here.

All declared that the course had been used as a test to see whether they could cope with higher-level courses. Spelling tests had been given, undermining their confidence. As far as the tutor was concerned, 'there is no excuse for an adult who cannot spell'.

To some extent the students were dissatisfied with the course because they had been working in supervisory roles for many years without the need for educational courses, until suddenly their company wanted external training. To them, experience on the job was more important than paper qualifications. The college had delivered a course based on the educating capability of its resources (staff), while the students and the company saw their needs in the area of personal skills development.

The ongoing mismatching process was grounded in the initial non-congruence of the requirements of the participants and the offerings of the course. The college had never intended to offer skills training, but the course users/company were never able to fully articulate their needs for this until the end of the course. However, at the outset the participants had expected a more 'doing' and less 'listening' style of programme than the course proved to be. While the college was offering 'what and why', the participants were seeking 'how'. FE researcher

Conclusion

FE colleges consist of a number of small communities within a large community. The smaller communities, such as Access or A-level students, interact with only a limited number of the other college communities such as lecturers in particular departments, library staff, perhaps support staff and refectory staff. It is therefore very difficult to have a holistic view of life in an FE college. Instead, the community of the institution as a whole is made up of a variety of groups with different perspectives, discourses and stories.

Lecturers perceived the impact of incorporation and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act as pervasive and largely detrimental, both in terms of personal working conditions and in relation to who and what they could teach. For them, the culture of further education is dominated by the ideology and practice of marketisation and competitiveness. The past was viewed as 'the good old days' – perhaps a romanticised and distorted view, but one that shaped their consciousness and their definition of reality.

For young students, further education offers an escape from the discipline and rules of school and an opportunity to develop intellectually and socially as individuals in an emerging adult world. It is an arena where they can establish a sense of self, an identity as they move from childhood to adulthood, almost as a rite of passage. Some, however, remain as disaffected and alienated in further education as they were in school. They are there against their choice, as they were at school.

Further education also lets an adult experience self-development, change and a sense of identity rather than being a mother or wife. It is a means to redress the lack of earlier educational opportunities and gain educational achievement.

While a wide range of communities are being reached, particularly in colleges with outreach centres, it is apparent that there are other sections of industry, other excluded groups who could benefit from some form of learning in a local college.

4 Policy implications

This chapter looks at the project's key research findings in relation to the evolving formulation of policy within the FE sector. Some of the findings are timely, given the emphasis on widening access and implementing lifelong learning that has followed the Kennedy report. Others reinforce the difficulties in delivering lifelong learning to currently excluded groups and individuals. The findings also highlight an inherent issue in further education, which relates to the problem of defining further education's nature and purpose: how to cater for diverse students and communities, especially the excluded, within the constraints of marketisation, resources and national policy.

Further education is still adjusting, redefining and shaping its boundaries, purpose and philosophy in the aftermath of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act; it remains a contested and varied space. In a postmodernist sense it is both fragmented and pluralistic. Colleges continue to have many functions, catering for a heterogeneous student population differentiated by age, gender, class, ethnicity, level and type of study. Colleges are all, to a lesser or greater extent, characterised by a mixed economy offering vocational, academic, higher, adult and basic education. Changes in further education reflect the broader changes in society whereby the emphasis on the welfare state and public institutions has been displaced by the quest for marketisation, managerialism and profitability.

> *In all western states there has been a steady rise in individualistic and consumerist values and identities, and with it a gradual erosion of collective identities and beliefs. This has been enhanced, in many states, by the advance of neo-liberal ideologies and the encroachment of the market into every area of life. As national services and resources are increasingly privatised and subjected to the competitive forces of the market, so the public domain is diminished and the legitimacy of collective goals reduced.*
> Green, 1997, p184

In such a society, individualism dominates collectivism at institutional, community and state level. For example, the Government's Green Paper typifies the increasing expectation that adult learners should take responsibility for their own learning:

> *... the state, the community, does not see it fit or desirable any more to countersign the social, human costs of economic solvency (which under market conditions is equivalent to profitability). Instead, it shifts the payment to the victims themselves, present and future. It refuses the responsibility for their ill fate – just as it had abandoned the old task of 'recommodification' of labour. No more collective insurance against the risks; the task of coping with the collectively produced risks has been privatised.*
> Bauman, 1998, p36

FE colleges have to be profitable and economically successful to survive in the post-1992 era; otherwise they collapse or are subject to takeovers by larger, more powerful colleges. In this scenario, offering vocational courses and links with industry is more attractive than providing programmes for disadvantaged and disempowered groups in the community. Some of the colleges in this study have clearly opted primarily for the vocational route – the approach favoured by governments and the European Commission, which believe (although there is no evidence to prove it) that education will lead to economic and hence social regeneration and cohesion.

A few colleges emphasise a community mission through outreach centres and community development. Education for social purpose and empowerment, although not transformation, is the primary goal. The funding mechanism, however, means that colleges can only go so far along this humanistic road. Money needs to be provided and funding mechanisms changed if colleges are to widen access to excluded groups as outlined by Kennedy (1997). Otherwise, disadvantaged communities will continue to be marginalised and excluded from learning.

Our research identified the following key issues and recommendations:

1. Further education is changing more rapidly than perceptions of further education, even those held by people acquainted with the sector as learners or potential customers for courses and training. Further education is still widely viewed as sitting awkwardly between compulsory schooling and higher education, with a remit dominated by technical and craft training; this image is off-putting to potential learners. A better understanding of what further education can offer is, therefore, likely to be a basic requirement of success for further education's agenda.

2. The FE college is now dominated numerically by part-time, adult students. Further education is the new version of the adult college, but on a much greater scale than the old adult colleges could aspire to. Moreover, the college now depends on part-time staff to teach this new clientele. Such staffing gives the college enormous teaching resources, flexibility and economy, but a reliance on part-timers may affect morale and the success of whole-college approaches to development strategies.

3. Colleges have developed their expertise in marketing and student guidance, under the guise of Student Services. However, our evidence suggests that colleges are better at marketing and at guiding potential students onto specific courses than they are at giving the time to listen to those potential students' wants and needs. Of course, greater needs analysis is costly, particularly as potential students may require a good deal of time and encouragement to articulate clearly their needs.

4. The model of the adult learner as autonomous, self-directed and highly motivated is remote from the reality of many students presenting themselves in college. They need a great deal of support, and may have to approach their learning objective indirectly by means of various preparatory courses and intermediate qualifications. Moreover, for many adult learners the goal of the qualification is less important than increasing self-confidence, which may then lead to a job or a qualification. The funding regime under which colleges operate does not equate easily with meeting these needs. Both community groups and industrial groups place a high value on outreach activity, which is expensive.

5. Many adult students returning to education, as well as younger students, identify with a (sympathetic) tutor or group of tutors, rather than with the college as a whole. The college must be big enough to offer specialist teaching in the areas where it is needed, but must be prepared to operate as a small-scale social institution in supporting groups of students.

Whole-college approaches to staff and curriculum development are not inappropriate but must recognise that many students rate their experience of the college in terms of their contact with one or two of the tutors. If these tutors are part-time and relatively isolated from the college mainstream, there are risks to college procedures on quality assurance and enhancement.

6. Many adult students return to education tentatively. Their commitment to learning can easily be shaken by bad experiences in colleges. Adults value highly such practical considerations as accessible location and good parking/public transport. They want their courses to be held at convenient times, lecturers to be punctual, teaching to be interesting and well delivered (content is less important), and classes to be properly disciplined. Younger students valued having spaces to meet in the college, and leisure and sports facilities either within or nearby the college. Students with disabilities emerged from the research as an under-resourced/undervalued/neglected potential constituency.

7. Colleges need to adopt a multi-agency approach if they are to meet the complexity of difficulties faced by many existing and potential students. Resourcing such an approach is expensive; at the same time colleges are confronted by a competitive external market for education in which their rivals are other FE colleges, schools, sixth form colleges, higher education, TECs and private-sector providers. We are still in the first phase of adaptation to the 1992 Act and incorporation, and the competition for market share is raw and quite crude. Overtime, cooperative arrangements, market sharing and even cartelisation may enable colleges to manage a more regulated or social market. Competitiveness extends into the colleges; divisions of faculties compete for students, and useful contacts outside the college are jealously protected and hidden from internal competitors. Such sensitivity made some colleges in this project reluctant even to provide contacts who could be sent the project questionnaire, a major part of the quantitative research. Since 1992 a crude form of competition has operated, comparable to the early stages of capitalism. More mature organisations develop procedures for managing markets, but further education has not got there yet. In competing for profitable work some areas are bound to be lost.

8. The move towards a market economy within further education has led to a preference for offering programmes that will bring in money. Staff feel that it is becoming harder to provide at a low fee for those who traditionally have been excluded. At the same time, community groups are asking for low-cost or free courses for those on low incomes, to encourage them to participate in learning. Colleges need to provide a more even balance between profitable courses and social-purpose-type courses, or the chance to participate in lifelong learning will only be available to those who possess cultural and economic capital.

9. Colleges want to expand into continuing professional development training and courses, as this is rewarding financially. However, evidence from employers suggests that energy should be focused on smaller and medium-sized businesses, with training delivered at the workplace in some cases. Most large employers can provide training in-house and are therefore not looking for external agencies. The vision held by many employers is that colleges are working with out-of-date rather than state-of-the-art equipment. FE colleges also face strong challenges in this field from private training bodies.

10. Younger students are choosing further education – some positively, some not – as an alternative to school, low-paid employment or unemployment.

External policies, such as the New Deal, mean that further education increasingly has to work with students who are not motivated to learn. Those who want to be in further education see it as offering a space, which school cannot, between childhood and adulthood, providing an opportunity to develop and grow up – a place where emerging adult identities can be acted out and established.

11. Staff perceive the world of further education to be markedly different in the post-1992 era. Many speak romantically of the good old days. Life as a lecturer is now felt to be driven by values that espouse competitiveness, individualism and marketisation in a culture wanting more of its labour force. Divisions between staff on the new contract and those who have chosen to remain on the 'silver book' are apparent. With increasing workloads, teaching and administration, staff feel that they no longer have time for extra-curricular work, particularly making contacts with the local community. Discontent with and conflict over working conditions have been redirected from the LEA to internal senior management, who are perceived by staff as having internalised the values and practice of new managerialism. While communication has improved between departments/faculties, the dominant management structure remains hierarchical; incorporation does not appear to have resulted in a democratisation of the college community.

12. Colleges are well able to undertake research into the FE sector, but there are important organisational issues to be clarified if such research is to be conducted successfully. In themselves unproblematic, these issues arose in a number of colleges and their absence is a major impediment to successful research: clear lines of responsibility and accountability for the research; support not only from senior management but also (perhaps less obviously and more decisively) from immediate line management; adequate time to undertake research; a readiness to accept that the benefits of research are long-term and do not manifest themselves immediately as marketing opportunities; and continuity of staff involved in research.

Our research concentrated on the college as a community and its relationships with the communities it serves or seeks to serve. We also wanted to obtain other relevant views of these college-communities relationships. To do this we commissioned research on the views of local governments, the TECs and the government office for the region (Government Office of the West Midlands). This part of the project was undertaken by an outside contractor, Greater London Enterprise (GLE), which has considerable experience of researching the FE sector's role in economic development. We felt that GLE could bring an external objectivity to the research, which would be difficult for a college to achieve; for instance, it would be easier for GLE rather than a college researcher to ask local-authority chief executives for their view of the local college's role.

Colleges are often represented, not least by colleges themselves, as having a major role to play not only in education and training – including Government schemes such as New Deal and social inclusion projects – but also in economic regeneration. FEDA has distinguished, in *Furthering local economies*, three such roles for colleges:

- **Service provider** – the traditional role of education and training for the post-compulsory sector
- **Stakeholder** – the college as a major local employer and buyer of goods and services
- **Strategic partner** – the college as an actor in its own right alongside local government, TECs, and other boards and partners in local and regional economic partnerships.

GLE found that the colleges in the West Midlands have the potential to play all these roles, but that the third role – a seductively attractive one for colleges hoping to escape from further education's traditional Cinderella place within education and the local community – remains underdeveloped and not fully recognised by other putative partners. Although incorporation gave the colleges greater capacity to act as a strategic partner, the process of incorporation caused them to lose ground with their former local authorities. The colleges have relatively little importance at the regional level of partnerships (West Midlands) or even sub-regional level (for instance, Coventry and Warwickshire), and the sector is not well represented at the sub-regional level on boards and partnerships.

In any case, 'representation' is a misleading concept given the competition between colleges. There is greater recognition of their role from individual local authorities, especially when the local authority has only one FE college to deal with. The competitiveness between colleges, which harms their role in dealing with the wider communities, is also seen as a handicap by the local authorities. But at the individual borough or district level the college is seen as an important partner, in terms of delivering education, training and social inclusion agendas and in the strategic agenda for economic regeneration. Interestingly, one large TEC was unconcerned by competition between colleges, perceiving it positively as 'niche specialisation' which could meet the varied needs of local labour markets.

The development of the strategic-partner role is not a simple positive-sum game for colleges, especially smaller ones which lack the resources to act as strategic partners. The lure of partnerships with other, high-profile partners may deflect colleges from their core functions in education and training for their local communities, and may require colleges to put scarce resources into increasing their capacity to operate strategic partnerships by developing new skills or hiring new staff. The HE sector's growth and development of its own regional agenda have made higher education in some ways a more attractive partner than further education within regional, sub-regional and even local partnerships, and have blurred the distinctive role of further education in meeting local needs. Cooperation between higher education and further education, as well as greatly increased competition within the HE sector, is a further complication.

There are more positive points to set against this relatively bleak picture, and three factors in particular may work in favour of the colleges:

- Their role in delivering the Government's agenda on social inclusion, including lifelong learning as a necessary component of inclusion
- Their training contacts with the small and medium-sized enterprises seen by the Government as the basis of economic regeneration
- Their existing rich relationships with their local communities.

The colleges' role in strategic partnerships and regeneration projects illustrates the FE sector's most entrenched characteristic both pre- and post-incorporation. The sector's strength lies in its diversity and comprehensiveness; its weakness lies in its very ubiquity as a jack of all trades.

Conclusion

Colleges will carry immediate and fundamental responsibility in the Government's plans for lifelong learning and social inclusion. There is no doubt from our evidence that colleges are already playing their part here, but policy issues must be resolved if the work is to continue successfully and expand.

We are left with the question of whether further education's multifaceted nature points towards the multi-purpose college as the model of the future, or whether there is a role, at least in areas of higher population density, for specialisation and cooperation between colleges based on distinct roles. That question emerged strongly in the minds of our researchers although it does not equate easily with the idea of the inclusive college, responsive to a wide variety of needs and able to respond accordingly.

Whether or not colleges revert to a degree of specialisation, both community and industrial groups strongly favoured the idea of partnership with the college. Meeting the needs of under-represented groups will be expensive, but partnerships, which can draw in other funding, can play a part.

The research also reveals the extent of cultural transition within further education. Since incorporation, colleges have changed dramatically – much more, as we report above, than the public's perception of change. However, there is a feeling that colleges have still not arrived at a period embracing consolidation and stabilisation. Internal and external communities are still being worked out. It is important that the less powerful voices in the community are not forgotten in the emerging further education as it competes to establish an influential role within the post-compulsory sector.

Further education still needs to determine and establish its future philosophy and direction, but as Austin (a college principal) points out:

> *The possible future scenario is a beguiling one, with colleges clearly located in the heart of the community, looked on with admiration or respect as powerful agents for beneficial change. They would be open and welcoming to every individual or group, all year and all day. They would provide ways in, progression through and ways out. They would be models of cost-effectiveness, efficiency and transparent accountability, and they would lead in matters of public concern, from equal opportunities to a new motorway proposal, from environmental awareness to local government reorganisation. We would all salute that flag but we are, of course, still miles away from that vision ... The means of getting from here to there, from obscurity to recognition, lie in the hands of college managers ... We are responsible for an immense asset of almost limitless potential. We have no acceptable reason for failure.* Austin, 1994, p138

More recently Colin Flint, principal of Solihull College (one of the colleges in this study), has emphasised the crucial future role further education can and should play in relation to social inclusion and lifelong learning. He makes a plea for HE institutions to accept a more equal relationship and partnership with further education:

> *But further education has to be given its chance, because it is the only genuinely comprehensive bit of the entire system. The agenda for the future is the Kennedy agenda: social inclusion; widening participation; wiring the world ... We can refresh the parts other sectors cannot reach. Only further education can do that.* Flint, 1998

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Appendices

Appendix 1a

FE staff researching FE – the processes and issues

As indicated in the Introduction, this research project was innovative for all three partners – FEDA, the University of Warwick and the colleges – in that college staff were trained to undertake the research. Documenting the research processes is as important to the project as disseminating the research findings. Research in FE by FE has been encouraged by FEDA in recent years; several colleges are now developing a research culture, and in some cases a research unit. A national research network and a number of regional networks have been established. Research into further education is timely, following the changes initiated by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act:

> *A vibrant research community working in and around further education is essential for sectoral well-being since good scholarship informs a healthy profession and public policy also. For the next few years therefore, further education has a chance to get to know itself strategically and in relationship to other sectors of the knowledge society. The agenda will move on quickly of course, and the national policy community will at some point turn its attentions elsewhere, but in the meanwhile the sector must not pass up the invitation to develop an authoritative voice for itself.* Robertson, 1998, p1

Post-compulsory education has been an under-researched area. Incorporation, the Kennedy and Dearing reports and the Government's Green Paper have refocused the centrality of further education in both educational and research terms.

The university's view of the research process

The University of Warwick undertook the research project in conjunction with its nine regional FE colleges, working links having previously been established. The university established a Community University Board in 1994 to give an institutional focus to its broadening links with the FE sector, then concentrated on its 2+2 degrees offered in partnership with the nine colleges. Within the university, the Department of Continuing Education was already building a network of FE practitioners in the region, mostly through its 2+2 network. In 1996 the Department established a Further Education Research Consortium as the research and development arm of the Community University Board. The FEDA project, and in particular its emphasis on collaboration between research partners, fitted perfectly the emerging research agenda at the university.

The collaborative research has been a learning and evolving process for all partners. The university's perception is that colleges adapted to the research process and its requirements in a variety of ways; some colleges were more successful than others. A core group emerged in those that adapted best, consisting of key staff undertaking the bulk of the research supported by senior management who recognised the demands the project would place on staff. These colleges have benefited the most at both staff and institutional level; participation has generated in the staff a personal interest in undertaking future research. The less successful colleges relied on existing management structures, with the result that responsibility for the project passed from manager to manager with no one prepared to take personal responsibility.

Agreement to participate in the project came from the principals of the nine colleges. In hindsight it appears that this agreement and enthusiasm to be involved

was not communicated in some colleges to the rest of the staff. It may instead have been interpreted as yet another initiative, and more workload, being imposed from above. Continuity and coherence was lost in these institutions as different members of staff attended project meetings. A minority arrived at meetings having been told to attend by senior management but knowing nothing about the project.

Colleges, and the university, were paid upon successful completion of work packages. The payment was not designed to meet the full cost of FE staff time; as part of the partnership approach to the project, colleges themselves contributed staff time. Although college principals agreed to this, some middle management did not translate it into practice. Some staff found it very difficult to secure time away from teaching, for various reasons: it was impossible to find someone else to do the teaching, their heads of departments felt that the financial contribution was inadequate, or at worst the principal had not informed the departmental heads of the college's involvement in the project. Staff frequently expressed their frustration at not being given enough time to participate in the project; knowing that their principal was keen on involvement did not help dissipate their feelings of marginalisation working on the project at college level. To them at times it felt like an uphill battle.

The project was managed through a complex committee system, designed to reflect and enhance the research's collaborative nature. Each college appointed a coordinator who was in regular contact with the research officer at Warwick. The project director and research officer reported to regular meetings of the university's FE research consortium, on which all nine regional colleges were represented. The consortium requested that the project director and research officer also consult with a smaller contact group, consisting of some of the FE staff most involved in the project, about key decisions such as the principles governing selection of colleges to undertake specific packages. Progress on the project was thus heavy on communications. The research process raised a number of issues about communication within the FE sector. For instance, the project required colleges to establish clear lines of communication and accountability, which necessarily cut across day-to-day lines of management.

College staff received research training, equipping them with an insight into quantitative and qualitative approaches and the ethics of research. However, time and workload did not allow them to supplement this with wider reading, although those who were social scientists did have some prior experience of research. In relation to the research tasks, some colleges put more effort into ensuring that questionnaires were returned and thus obtained a higher response rate. To speed up and professionalise the process, the questionnaires were coded and analysed by Computing Services at Warwick.

Most of the college staff preferred the qualitative stage of the research, as they found undertaking interviews interesting and rewarding. All admitted that their interview techniques improved the more they did; employers were identified as the most difficult group to interview. Analysing a wealth of interview data proved a daunting and very time-consuming task. The research team adopted a grounded theory approach; at times this caused difficulty with both the FE Research Consortium and FEDA, which were more familiar with the more traditional and positivistic way of analysing interview data.

Communication with those doing the research was sometimes difficult and frustrating, but this was inevitable given the nature and geography of FE colleges. Good working relationships were established with committed colleges. Not surprisingly, as FE staff were having to carry out the research in addition to their normal workload, the research process was slower than the conventional approach of sending in a team of researchers from the university. In this respect the project may have been overambitious in its expectations of staff, colleges and outcomes. Strategic research undertaken by colleges needs to be more realistic, smaller-scale and shorter-term.

Undertaking collaborative research in further education: reflections and observations: a case study at Evesham

Introduction

Evesham College is a small, rural FE institute. Many staff undertake a variety of administrative and academic duties. Whilst the college has been involved in a number of local and national collaborative projects since its inception in 1970, it has not been large enough to justify the establishment of a research sector, unit or even cost centre. When the college was invited by University of Warwick to take part in the FEDA project, it was felt that, whilst funds were scarce, taking part in such a collaborative venture could generate interesting findings and would also consolidate a working relationship with the university. Three members of staff agreed to undertake the research work on behalf of the college. This is a summary of their experiences.

Working with others: undertaking collaborative research in further education

Involvement in a joint research venture required a commitment to active participation in a range of collaborative consultative meetings held at the university; this was time-consuming and, at times, frustrating. Key personnel from a number of FE institutions were often absent, or sent representatives who had very little knowledge of or interest in the project.

As a result there emerged a number of hierarchical work cells, which made key policy decisions in the absence of personnel from other participating colleges. We believe that future collaborative projects such as this will only work if:

- Participants are limited in number and geographical location
- Institutions identify an appropriate coordinator (in terms of relevant experience and status within the internal hierarchy) to oversee a (numerically) small research team
- Institutions agree remission, etc. with participants from the outset
- Collaborators consider extending the use of IT (using video link-ups, for example)
- Institutions refrain from sending personnel who have little or no interest in the project or who appear motivated by other agendas.

On the inside looking in: undertaking research in further education

Working in and carrying out research on further education was sometimes problematic. Because of time constraints, team members could meet only once a fortnight for 10–15 minutes to discuss progress, and aspects of the research were designated to one individual within the team. At times, commitment to the project was affected by demands from elsewhere, and our research was compromised by our commitment to the institution and to protecting those within it. From October to March, meetings became shorter and deadlines stretched. The research team relied heavily on the goodwill of others in the institution and elsewhere. Students, for example, were coopted to help distribute and collate questionnaires, and we tended to interview staff whom we knew rather than those who were appropriate; in consequence, our material was drawn from the articulate sectors within the institution. (In the light of findings from the other colleges, we suspect that this was a common characteristic.)

We believe that any future projects that intend to explore further education using those on the inside will need to:

- Select appropriate staff
- Ensure all facets of the institution are recognised and explored
- Disseminate findings to all those within the institution (or associated with the institution)
- Give careful consideration to timing and the length of the project.

Collaboration and control

Whilst recognising that a project of this size involved a number of state sectors, we believe that the problems we experienced were partly caused by FEDA's apparent unwillingness to delegate control to an identifiable and appropriate number of participants. This led to a number of issues remaining unresolved for periods of time, frustrating our attempts to complete the work on schedule. This problem was compounded by the establishment of diplomatically important but essentially meaningless consultative committees.

We believe that any future collaborative projects should:

- Identify management structure from the outset
- Devolve power to an identifiable team
- Limit the number of consultants
- Limit the number of participating institutions
- Carry out a number of short-range studies.

Summary

Incorporation has given further education the opportunity to find out for the first time what really goes on in this sector. The project has enhanced existing links between the university and the nine local colleges, both institutionally and individually. The research project's value is reflected in the networking processes it has generated between the colleges, and between the university and the colleges.

Most FE/HE partnerships are academic rather than research-based. College staff enjoyed undertaking the research, especially the interviewing of local people and college staff. Colleges now have trained personnel to undertake other college-based research. The research training, seminar and planning meetings have also enabled FE staff to find some space for reflection upon theory and practice in further education. Although the project pre-dates Dearing, Kennedy and the Government's Green Paper, there is a lot of material here about working between further education and higher education, as well as issues of social exclusion and inclusion. Working in partnership on a research project has also been a valuable learning experience for both the university and colleges, and is already generating opportunities for future collaboration.

Appendix 1c | Andrew Morris

The FEDA perspective: ways of researching further education

Traditionally, research into learning and institutions has been undertaken by dedicated professional researchers based in university departments or other national research organisations. Colleges are now engaging more actively in research, occasionally as sponsor or contractor but more frequently through an increasingly systematic approach to their internal developmental needs.

Many universities are researching topics of direct interest to colleges, such as teaching styles, diagnostic assessment, qualification structures, staying-on rates, and skill and labour markets. There is often little or no participation by college-based practitioners in such research, and little dissemination aimed at them. At the same time, many colleges are undertaking research into institutional issues such as retention, achievement, pedagogic techniques and progression, and a few are commissioned to research community issues such as social care provision, environmental health problems, and hotel and leisure services. As yet such research tends to be localised and isolated; a culture of research across further education is only just beginning to emerge.

However, there is an increasing trend towards research undertaken in partnerships, where different organisations' specialisms are integrated to tackle broader matters of social and political concern. These range from interdisciplinary projects within universities, where sociologists, psychologists, economists and educationalists contribute their discipline-based perspectives, to cross sector ones where colleges, business and universities combine to tackle issues like progression, skill development and student guidance.

Collaborative research – the pain and the pay-off

Researching collaboratively across sectors has many attractions. Involving practitioners in the process can bring research closer to its application; for example, early collaboration over the specification of a project's aims and methods may lead to results that are more likely to be used in practice. Collaboration also brings together complementary skills, which raise the overall quality; college teachers may have a more specialised understanding of teaching and learning interactions, guidance staff a greater insight into motivations or barriers to access, and managers knowledge of the forces determining the curriculum offered, while professional researchers may bring greater critical experience to shaping the methodology and positioning the research in the context of other work reported in the academic literature.

Other cultural differences can be turned to advantage – colleges may be geared up for disseminating research, linking it to staff development activities and channelling it towards strategic planning or daily management practice. Universities may, through interdisciplinary discussion, bring to bear lessons from elsewhere, perhaps from psychological, sociological or economic research and through international comparative studies.

Partnership working

A number of problems arise in partnership working, however, which must be allowed for from the outset. Many are true for any form of institutional collaboration; some are specific to universities and colleges.

Organisations develop cultural and behavioural styles appropriate to their particular purposes and priorities. The college role is to organise and promote learning, usually in local communities; universities combine teaching with research, often in an international community. University staff are rewarded for publishing in the academic press, where impact on the research community may be more important than impact on policy and practice. College staff, inspired by the direct impact of their work on the lives of the learners in front of them, may have little time to analyse their work critically in relation to that of others, or to build on underpinning theory.

In any partnership, it is difficult at first for individuals to understand the emphases in skills and knowledge of others from different professional backgrounds, or to welcome the particular strengths of colleagues from different sectors. Collaboration between further education and higher education is particularly blighted by deeply held perceptions of the two sectors' relative status. This problem affects FE/HE research.

Structural issues

To be specific, the lives of college staff are likely to be dominated by fast-moving operational questions, which they would like research to help them with. Teachers are usually heavily timetabled in the classroom, managers tied to meeting schedules and diverted by unpredictable events. This inevitably hinders communication and consistency of attendance at crucial seminars and meetings. Clearly, a professional level of dedication to the research is required by all participants; where necessary this needs to be backed up by formal commitment of time and assertion of priority from college managers. The research should not be embarked upon without this.

Similarly, university partners must understand colleges' concern to secure direct value from the research, especially in relation to the usefulness of its outcomes and the timing of its delivery. In reality, colleges are not wholly pragmatic and universities not wholly scholastic; mixing the cultures can be exhilarating for both.

Technical issues

It is not helpful to make categorical distinctions between universities and colleges at the level of specific skills and resources. Universities vary considerably amongst themselves, as do colleges; many colleges have HE provision, qualified research staff and recognised research expertise in specific fields. In the field of research into educational institutions and practices, both sectors have well developed but rather disconnected traditions.

However, the experience of this project and others raises a number of practical issues, discussed briefly below, which confront research teams working across the FE/HE boundary.

Data gathering

At the outset, it is vital to specify in detail which data are to be collected, and to check that they are accessible. For large national data sets like the FEFC Individual Student Record, a clear understanding of the level of validity of the data and the precise fields to be used must be agreed across all parts of a collaborative project.

For primary data gathered in the course of practitioner-based research, there are likely to be difficulties in:

- Gaining sufficient data with the limited staff time available
- Minimising observer distortions where the researcher is part of the observed organisation
- Interacting data drawn from one source with that from another.

As an example of the last point, interview responses – if carefully planned – can be set alongside case study analyses and questionnaire data on the same issue, to build up a richer picture of the problem. Ideally, the limitations of each approach may be partly offset by the bigger picture arising from all three. In practice, such triangulation can prove difficult, either because the methods are not planned together in enough detail or because the individuals associated with each technique are insufficiently familiar with each other's work.

Analysis

Problems frequently arise in analysing or interpreting the findings. Initially, some basic hypothesis needs to be agreed across the research partners to determine what should be done to the raw data. Discussion leading to a common understanding is needed on questions such as:

- How far should the statistical processing of interview or questionnaire responses be taken?
- Can data drawn from different sources be directly compared?
- Can the conclusions drawn from different sets of data be legitimately compared?

These are the standard research questions, which seldom have clear cut answers; working outside the conventions of a single institution may make it harder to arrive at agreement.

Interpreting

In moving on from the immediate findings of research, how far can we direct the conclusions of the research to the issues that stimulated and funded it in the first place? It is helpful to readdress the aims of the work and to interrogate the findings against them. This can be a painful process; methodological and, occasionally, ethical questions may arise about just how conclusive the research findings in fact are. However, the challenge of making research impact on policy or practice means that researchers have to judge carefully where to link their conclusions to issues of public concern.

Reporting

It is always difficult to move projects through their vital final stages, once the exploring and analysing stages have been completed. For action-researchers the action is over. Yet it is only through the reporting of the research that the world at large will hear about it at all.

To have impact, whether on immediate practice or more far-reaching policy, the collective thinking of the research partners needs to be directed at:

- Who needs to know about different aspects of the work
- How they might make use of it
- How the findings should be processed to be useful to the end user.

There are many ways of reporting. Full reports may be accompanied by summary leaflets targeted at particular groups – teachers, managers, policy officials and so on.

Practical tools like manuals or computer software may be developed. The Internet is increasingly being used for dissemination. Conferences and seminars need to be designed to attract people who could make use of the findings, as well as those who are simply interested in them.

Conclusion

University-based and college-based staff all have roles to play in each of the stages described. There are no simple answers to the dilemmas that arise. Increasing skill and understanding is required of all involved in the research partnership. College and university staff must help each other gain greater insight into the issues and greater rigour into the technique.

This project, like many others, demonstrates the benefits of an ongoing programme of staff development to accompany the research process. This can be achieved partly through formal workshop sessions on, for example, interview technique, observation or numerical methods. Ongoing seminars and mentoring relationships, through which technique and understanding are developed as part of the research process, are also important. A difficult balance has to be struck between the leadership needed to keep a project on track and the wider participation needed for inclusive research.

Ten tips I would offer for managing research partnerships are:

1. Only involve organisations that offer senior-level commitment of staff and resources.
2. Ensure that a detailed understanding of the sustained commitment of time, people and money is agreed at the outset.
3. Set up a regular cycle of business meetings, research seminars and skill workshops.
4. Discuss and agree on the distinctive roles of each player in the partnership.
5. Discuss, agree and record the key research questions and the project aims and objectives.
6. Plan and circulate the schedule of milestones in advance, naming key task leaders.
7. Agree at the outset on arrangements for mentoring, skill workshops and other training provision.
8. Carry out research tasks in pairs or small groups to avoid problems of professional isolation.
9. Refer back throughout the research to the work's original purposes and aims.
10. Allow consideration of the research's publication, dissemination and application to influence the project throughout.

Looking to the future

The future is encouraging for research into further education. Admittedly there is little prospect of colleges being granted public money to extend their activities beyond teaching to research. This seems unlikely even for those colleges teaching at degree and HE Levels 1 and 2. However, the need for regional and national agencies and for colleges themselves to understand more about learners, their motivation, skills, knowledge, labour markets and institutional practice is becoming ever more apparent. Funds that previously might have been distributed centrally for staff development or curriculum development are arriving as project funding. Funding for regeneration and economic development projects increasingly recognises the 'soft' aspects of developing people and communities as well as infrastructure and hardware. The national agency for funding academic research, the Economic and Social Research Council, requires projects within its Teaching and Learning programme to include elements of collaboration with practitioners.

Colleges will be developing their research capabilities; staff within them will be increasingly involved in reflection, systematic enquiry and action research. Many universities are involved in collaborative research, in which all partners are learning and developing together. For all of us, the issue will be how to develop our expertise in carrying out useful and robust research.

Further reading

A number of reports of sub-projects within the overall project are available. They are either FEDA research reports or University of Warwick working papers.

FEDA research reports

- *Concepts of community*
- *Local government and TECs*

Available from:
FEDA publications
Citadel Place, Tinworth Street
London SE11 5EH
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Fax: 020 7840 5401
e-mail: publications@feda.ac.uk

University of Warwick working papers

- *College 10 years ago*
- *FE college today*
- *Literature review*

Available from:
Mrs B Wilson
Department of Continuing Education
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
Tel: 01203 524617
e-mail: b.d.wilson@warwick.ac.uk

Other papers

- *Student population*
- *Community perceptions of FE: survey analysis*
- *Community perceptions of FE: interview analysis*

Available from:
FEDA research team
Citadel Place, Tinworth Street
London SE11 5EH
Tel: 020 7840 5400
Fax: 020 7840 5401

Since the 1980s further education has been in a state of transition. FE colleges now attract more adult learners than any other type of provider. Yet while colleges have moved on, research reveals that many people still view further education as the 'local tech'.

The FE college and its communities is the result of a collaborative research project between FEDA, the University of Warwick and college lecturers who gathered evidence of the ways in which different stakeholders viewed further education. This book identifies the value further education adds to an area and investigates the changing nature of the relationships between colleges, the communities they serve and the local organisations with which they interact.

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